

QUEER AND QUEERING: A WOMANIST SPIRITUALITY OF SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

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Queer and Queering: A Womanist Spirituality of Sports uncovers the ways in which sports and spirituality inform one another by asking and queering the following questions: Is sports a valid location for spiritual formation? How can sports, for participants and spectators, be considered spiritual formation? What theological presuppositions must be challenged and/or expanded to consider the connection between spiritual formation and sports? What capacity has each to inform the other? This dissertation employs an autoethnographic approach to trace my personal theological and active formation through sports using the metaphor of pilgrimage. Through my story, I engage social critique and challenge academic and societal norms. While mainline Protestant churches have sought to marginalize queer bodies, like my own, I propose Point Guard Spirituality using a QWEST framework to combat such marginalization. This framework uses a womanist spirituality which bespeaks wholeness, survival, empowerment, transformation of self, society and culture. By centering black women's experience, QWEST: understands the human being as text; begins the hermeneutical circle with experience; weaves possibilities that invite a response to life, the Sacred, and community; and invites sports participants and spectators to engage in flow to new milieus of transformation.

Keywords: spirituality, sports, play, womanist, queer, flow, autoethnography

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Chapter 1

Huddle Up: An Introduction

Pre-Game I

There I was, in the midst of history. I walked through the gladiator gate and onto the arena floor. I gazed downward from the arena floor to what looked like a labyrinth of what were once cages, hallways, and probably the chambers that housed the animals, slaves, and soon-to-be martyrs. I smelled the air rich with frenzy. I had finally made it to Rome, to the Colosseum—the Colosseum where many lives were lost in the name of sport, politics, and in some cases, religion. I found myself thinking about Perpetua and Felicity, two women with whom I identified deeply. My pilgrimage to Rome was to see where the greatest “champions” had walked through this very corridor onto this very platform to die in the name of sport. It was a beautiful burden to stand in the middle of my own locations and the Colosseum. I was there in the fullness of my athletic, queer, black, woman, theologian self. I, for once, was fully embodied and at home in a space that was the perfect amalgamation of sports and spirituality.

In Rome, I felt “A Coming Home to Myself.”¹ In the hybridity of embodiments, and more specifically sports, there is much to glean from the rigor as well as the enjoyment with which we can engage and discover possibilities for spiritual formation. For me, and for many others, sports and spirituality cannot be separated. Regarding sports, I mean not necessarily that one reaches the pinnacle of any sport, but rather and more simply that one participates for the sake of enjoyment or spectate for a sense of community. I mean sport as a ground for the formation of becoming—for spiritual formation.

¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 105–20.

While there is literature on womanist theology and queer studies in practical theology in general, and spiritual formation in particular, I have identified the following gaps: Black women and queer voices in practical theology and spiritual formation; participation in sports as an experience of spiritual formation; and the lack of auto-ethnography as a research method in practical theology and spiritual formation.

Queer and Queering: A Womanist Spirituality of Sports looks at how spirituality and sports inform one another. It is about the process of spiritual formation that has been present in my life and the lives of others through sports. To see sports as a spiritual practice is to see the intrinsic value sports has in the field of spirituality, as Michael Murphy and Rhea White have done:

The great seers of the contemplative traditions have explored the inner life more deeply than most of us, have opened up spiritual territories that we may or may not enter. But many athletes and adventurers have followed part way, however inadvertently, through the doorways of sport.²

American Catholic philosopher, diplomat, and author of *The Joy of Sports*, Michael Novak, argues for sport as a religion. He notes,

A sport is not a religion in the same way that Methodism, Presbyterianism, or Catholicism is a religion, but these are not the only kinds of religions. There are secular religions, civil religions. The United States of America has sacred documents to guide and inspire it....The institutions of the state generate a civil religion; so do the institutions of sport.³

² Michael Murphy and Rhea A. White, *The Psychic Side of Sports* (Reading MA: Addison Wesley, 1978), 6.

³ Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls and the Consecration of the American Spirit*, Revised (New York: Madison Books, 1994), 18.

Novak concludes, “sports are religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul.”⁴

Insomuch as sports were present and formative in the early beginnings of Christianity, so too are illustrative and formative athletic metaphors found in the Bible. Paul—who most likely drew upon early philosophers, such as Epictetus and Philo’s writings about the Olympic Games, used sports metaphors on several occasions. Of particular note is how he writes of the city of Corinth, which was located very near the site of the Isthmian Games, one of the Panhellenic Games of Ancient Greece, held every other year. Understanding context, and perhaps in an effort to meet the people in places of enjoyment and competition, Paul appeals to an image of an athlete, and of sport, for the purpose of encouragement and spiritual formation:

You know that in a race everyone runs, but only one wins the prize. So run in such a way as to win! Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a laurel wreath, even though it withers. We, on the other hand, do so to win an imperishable crown. I don’t run like one who loses sight of the finish line. I don’t fifth as if I were beating the air. What I do is discipline my body and keep it under control, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.⁵

Later in Hebrews, Paul challenges his readers, “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,”⁶ and in 2 Timothy 4:7, 8, he says, “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Now a laurel wreath awaits me; on that day our God, the just Judge,

⁴ Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 18.

⁵ Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

⁶ Hebrews 12:1, *The Inclusive Bible*.

will award it to me.”⁷ Living near the site of such renowned sports events, Paul’s readers would have understood his sports metaphors—as surely do we. But to what extent do we engage them?

Since many believe the Bible to be spiritually formative, perhaps Paul’s appropriation of sports metaphors is one we could usefully emulate, given that the US, like Corinth, is steeped in sports. Perhaps there are opportunities we are overlooking to integrate spirituality and/or religion with spirituality to encourage and enhance our spiritual formation.

In this dissertation I am not arguing for sport as a religion. Rather, I am arguing for a broad understanding of spirituality, one that is held in tension with religion and theology, and for an exploration of how sports inform spiritual formation. In fact, I will suggest that engagement with sport can be a spiritual practice in and of itself.

Transformative Issue and Purpose

Using a transformative framework I work under the assumption that “knowledge is not neutral and it reflects power and social relationships within society, and thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society.”⁸ With this assumption in mind, in this dissertation I consider the issues of inclusion and exclusion. My purpose in doing so is to highlight the ways in which sports and spirituality inform one another. I approach this task through an autoethnographic approach.

I am, above all, a practical theologian. My lived experiences inform my faith and my faith my experiences; the two cannot be separated. Through my story, I engage social critique and challenge academic and societal norms. It is through this research that I engage the self and others. I aim to provoke, inspire, and empower those on the margins whose voices are neither

⁷ 2 Timothy 4:7, 8, *The Inclusive Bible*

⁸ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska: Sage, 2013), 25–26.

heard nor considered as valid. In order to dismantle systems of oppression, voices from the margins must be heard. The purpose of my proposed Point Guard Spirituality is to encourage and foster the spiritual formation that occurs through our lives. This I do in what follows through my sports narratives.

Research Questions

The research questions explored throughout this dissertation are: Is sports a valid location for spiritual formation? How can sports, for participants and spectators, be considered spiritual formation? What needs to be expanded in our definitions of religion or spirituality to consider the relationship of formation in sports and spirituality as valid?

Scope and Limitations

This study cannot possibly examine all scholarly works by theologians and sports spiritualists, though I have nonetheless engaged a broad swath of literature concerning the topic of sports and spirituality. This study is meant to critique the limited ways in which we view sports, and suggest that we might also consider them as a reliable and authentic way in which we are formed spiritually. In doing research I did not find black women scholars who have written about sports and spirituality, but instead discovered that it is a field dominated by white men. Though I am not a queer theorist, I have “queered” our ways of looking at sports and spirituality throughout this dissertation. Another limitation is my religious affiliation. I identify as Christian, and therefore my work undoubtedly has Christian experience, tradition, but also bias layered within it. That said, Point Guard Spirituality is not meant to be solely Christian in nature. I envisage it as transreligious, able to be used by people of religions other than Christianity. As regards this dissertation’s scope, in it I examine the various ways in which sports and spirituality inform one another through their aspects of awe, wonder, mystery, and historical settings. Sports

has always been part of spirituality and some would say also of religion more broadly. They inform one another while not being the same thing in and of themselves.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the dissertation I make reference to sports. While there is a general understanding of “sports” as an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment,” sports can also be considered as play, as being “to engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.” As this work is autoethnographical, the particular sport to which I refer is the one I know best: women’s basketball.

I also use terms such as transdenominational, transreligious, and transdisciplinary, and by these I mean across and beyond one denomination, religion, and/or academic discipline.

For many people within and outside the gay community, the term “queer” is problematic. Renowned gender theorist Judith Butler claims,

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.⁹

Queer theorist David Halperin posits,

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis -à-vis the normative ... [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.¹⁰

⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of *Sex** (New York: Routledge, 1993), 228.

¹⁰ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick understand queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically.”¹¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, I use queer/queering to denote queer as an embodiment, as in lesbian—one of my locations. Yet, I also claim the following definitions of queer as descriptive of sexuality and yet, also beyond: odd, strange, unusual, peculiar, curious, bizarre, eccentric, unconventional, unorthodox, unexpected, atypical, out of the ordinary, remarkable, offbeat, mysterious, and mystifying. Queering, as I do in this dissertation, means on the one hand to disrupt and problematize, but it also means to create possibilities. Furthermore, it refers to attending to concrete lived experience, to where we work at the intersection of culture, community, and sexuality to engage in critical conversation.¹² By problematizing oppressive systems and structures, I ask questions that take into account people who struggle to find authentic and meaningful life on the boundaries of society and culture.¹³ In so doing, sex and sexuality re-enter the realm of the holy and pure—categories and distinctions that cease to exist when their boundaries are smudged and blurred both by a God and by people of faith who embody and embrace sexuality and sexual experience.

¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.

¹² Jeanne Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” in *The Wiley Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014), 419.

¹³ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

“A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually,”¹⁴ is one-way Alice Walker describes a womanist. Walker’s more ample original definition of womanism and mysticism is worth quoting:

- Womanist.** 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another folk expression. “You trying to be grown. Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.”
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance to laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally, universalist, as in: “Mama, why are brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “it wouldn’t be the first time.”
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.¹⁵

Inasmuch as a womanist is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, this sense of purpose is rooted in community. It is helpful here to consider the etymology of the prefix *com* in community. The Oxford English Dictionary identifies *com* as a Latin prefix and defines *com* as the sense of “ ‘together, together with, in combination or union,’ also ‘altogether, completely.’ ”¹⁶ This notion is fundamental in this dissertation as it is formational for the

¹⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

¹⁵ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, xi–xii.

¹⁶ “Com-, Prefix : Oxford English Dictionary,” accessed October 22, 2019, <https://electra.lmu.edu:5402/view/Entry/36719?rskey=KBm1Rx&result=2#eid>.

concepts of *community*, *competition*, *compassion*, and *communion*, all of which I use to connect sports and spirituality.

To this end, I employ the following definitions and the multiplicity of meanings:

Community:

- a. “a body of people or things viewed collectively;
- b. a body of people leading a communal life according to a religious rule; a religious society, a monastic body.
- c. a shared or common quality or state;
- d. the fact of being in communion; social intercourse; fellowship, amity;
- e. community spirit *n.*: a sense of fellowship and solidarity which is felt by the members of a community.”¹⁷

Competition:

a “striving with” that does not lessen the desire to “win,” but...in partnership rather than having to exude superiority over an opponent. It is motivated by the love of the game and shared enjoyment versus being driven by a desire for domination or conquest. Therefore, the goal for competition as a “striving with” is learning, mastery, and the pursuit of excellence whereby the opponent is an enabler or partner in the quest of winning. There is still a deep hunger to win, but the focus is the process more than the outcome.¹⁸ Here there is a balance between seriousness and play and a connection with this understanding of competition that can be located within spirituality. For example, to “petition” God in prayer, is to respectfully or humbly request something, as “striving with,” or “co-creating” with the Divine.

Compassion, as defined by Dr. Frank Rogers, Jr.:

[is a] means to becoming most deeply human. It revives the pulse of one depleted by heartbreak and suffering. It sustains the pulse of interior freedom and grounded empowered care. And it resuscitates the pulse of the person deadened by brutality, uniting him or her once more with the human community. Compassion is the heartbeat that restores life. Compassion is the bond of genuine connection.¹⁹

¹⁷ “Com-, Prefix.”

¹⁸ David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier, *True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2009), 47.

¹⁹ Frank Rogers, Jr., *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room Books, 2015), 15.

Communion

- a. “The action or fact of sharing or holding something in common with others; mutual participation; the condition of things so held, mutuality, community, union.
- b. The fact of being associated or linked; association, connection.
- c. Originally: religious fellowship or conversely close spiritual union. Later also (originally *poetic*): intimate engagement or union of a spiritual or mystical nature.
- d. Participation in the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, *spec.* by the reception of consecrated elements.”²⁰

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was to glean the threads of spiritual formation that lay within stories of my past, particularly my experiences as an athlete. I reviewed my life through the lens of the critique and challenge of societal, religious, and academic norms. I was the participant-observer who sought to reflect upon the ways in which sports and spirituality have been intertwined in my life and, arguably, in the lives of others. I am a queer, black, female, former All-America basketball player, and a former Division I basketball coach. I also enjoy socio-economic and educational privilege.

Challenges and Opportunities

A womanist spiritual framework bespeaks wholeness, survival, empowerment, transformation of self, society, and culture with black women at the center, yet the transformation is for all without hindering any other group. Womanism offers a critique of race, class, gender, and power relationships and a valuing of the human body and life experiences of black women as a valid and fruitful basis for *doing* theology. Womanists also understand sexuality optimally as a source and experience of freedom. Womanists offer a (re)reading of

²⁰ “Communion, n. : Oxford English Dictionary,” accessed October 22, 2019, <https://electra.lmu.edu:5402/view/Entry/37318?redirectedFrom=communion#eid>.

sacred texts, which include but is not limited to the Bible. Sacred texts for womanists can include nature, current context(s), life experiences, ancestors' lives and experiences in the Western world beginning with chattel slavery and can also consider ways in which African spirituality informs or informed the life of the slaves in practices that have been passed down in Christianity. The aforementioned womanist tenets have at their core an incarnational theological purview. That is to say that the "Word became flesh" and the embodiment of Jesus Christ legitimizes the body and the ways in which we are embodied beings going about the work of Jesus, being fully and unapologetically human, for transformation leading toward the full flourishing of all for the common good.

To this end, a womanist scholar/practitioner can use a practical lens to engage the challenges and opportunities of sports as a foundation and a source, to debunk, unmask, critique and analyze power, race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. It can be said then that a goal of such an endeavor would be to use sports and sports figures for the work of transformation of self, society, and culture. The inherent challenges of using sports as a lens for theological reflection include the misnomer that athletes are merely "jocks" and should only be valued for how they can "produce" in their given sport. Typically, tightly entwined with this is an inaccurate portrayal of athletes as not "thinking" people, but as those who merely use their bodies and not their minds. "In public image," says T. George Harris, "athletes were once viewed as muscular beasts, perhaps too dumb to experience anything requiring unusual powers of mind."²¹ In fact, an athlete uses both in equal measure.

Furthermore, sports that are considered to be only recreational, a "game" or "play," have not been considered a valid source of inquiry or knowledge for the rigors of the academy. Along

²¹ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, xix.

with this, there has been an assumption that to consider sports as a source or means of spiritual formation would somehow be to lessen the rigors of “proper” academic and spiritual formation.

Critiques also arise in theology, even practical theology, that suggest theological gleanings cannot be derived from such “play.” Further, the embedded biases toward women, more specifically black women in practical theology, spiritual formation, and more broadly in the academy as a whole, show that such black women have been historically underrepresented and undervalued for their unique, rigorous, and important contributions. Likewise, society has undervalued and underrepresented women’s sports and women athletes. Fostered by such attitudes, it has likewise been assumed that a woman’s perspective on anything practical, theological, and/or sports related would be inherently less valuable than the perspective or contribution of a man.

After all, the critics would say, “good” theology can only be derived from sound doctrine, the Bible, Christian history, and from “certain” “vetted” historical shapers of the tradition. While some of the challenges posed can be valid critiques, I suggest that many opportunities exist nonetheless. For example, sports and sports figures in the United States have often been at the beginning, or at least alongside, every major social justice reform. Though mostly men’s sports and sports figures have been lauded, women have also been present in such reforms.

Just a cursory glance at history reminds us of track Olympian Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics during Hitler’s Germany, coming away with gold medals; Boxing’s Muhammad Ali’s (Nation of Islam) protest of the Vietnam war and race in the 1960s and ’70s and beyond; Women’s tennis stars, both Serena and Venus Williams (Jehovah’s Witness) shattering racial stereotypes and records in tennis and society; men’s professional football and basketball players coming out as queer, prior to the adoption of laws on marriage equality; and basketball player

Brittany Griner (Christian, Baylor University) marrying and coming out as queer after college, and challenging body stereotypes and gender binaries through her physical appearance. Before professional football's Colin Kaepernick took a social justice stand by kneeling during the national anthem to bring awareness to the Black Lives Matter movement, there was a college woman, Toni Smith, from a small Division III school called Manhattanville College who turned her back on the American Flag during the anthem, noting, "I'm from a mixed racial and ethnic background. My mom is Jewish, and my dad is Black, white and Cherokee... (Given the) prison industrial complex and the wars against Native Americans...[t] his flag represents the slaughter of our ancestors."²² Similarly, noteworthy is that the first team to bring awareness to the Black Lives Matter movement were the Women's National Basketball Association's Minnesota Lynx. These few examples highlight that sports and activism have long been associated.

Yet one can surmise by just these few examples and what their narrative expose, challenge, and inform the many ways in which political, social, and societal norms are altered. To be sure, the actions of those mentioned have transformed the world. A heightened feminist perspective reminds us that the personal *is* political. Is there something inherent in Christian religion that does not lend itself to athletes taking such social justice action? If so, how might Christian spirituality lead the charge for change? In the end, given the goal of womanist practitioners to bring about wholeness and transformation by centering the lives of black women, centering black women in sports for the transformation and survival of all is a valid source and ground for theological reflection.

Sports and Religion in Antiquity

²² <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/thoughts-on-colin-kaepernick-from-an-athlete-who-walked-that-path/> Accessed November 24, 2020.

Rupert Sheldrake in, *Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work: Spiritual Practices in a Scientific Age*, believes “sports may be one of the most common ways in which people experience the self-transcendence that can come through being present.”²³ He continues, “the word sport is indirectly derived from the Latin root *portarte*, meaning to carry, as in our English words export (to carry out), deport (to carry away) and disport (away from carrying) – which came to mean to amuse oneself, or to make merry, or to play games. Sport comes from disport.”²⁴

Play comes from the Old English *plega* to frolic. The primary English meanings are to exercise oneself, or to act or move energetically. Play also means to engage in a game, or to play for stakes...or to take part in a sport. The Middle English word *gamen*, related to Old High German *gaman*, merriment, meant a game or a sport.²⁵

Ghazi bin Mohammad in *The Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture* notes that the word "sport" comes from the "Middle English word *disporter* meaning 'any light-hearted recreational activity.'"²⁶ Similarly to Sheldrake's finding, Mohammad continues, “the Middle English word *disporter* in turn comes from the Latin *desporto*, meaning ‘to carry away,’ for this is what amusement does: it momentarily carries you away from mundanity.”²⁷

Both Mohammad and Sheldrake trace the history of the word “sports” and its meaning steeped in disport/desporto; being carried away. Historically, one of the earliest accounts of

²⁴ Rupert Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work: Spiritual Practices in a Scientific Age* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019), 11.

²⁵ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 11–12.

²⁶ Ghazi bin Mohammad, *The Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 1998), 62–63.

²⁷ Mohammad, *Sacred Origins of Sports and Culture*, 62–63.

being carried away in such a manner comes from Mayan culture and their use of sports. Siegfried Dewitte highlights,

The archaeological evidence suggests these games were being played at least as early as 1500 BC, and ball courts are an important part of Mayan archaeological sites. These were not just games, but complex rituals in which the movement of the ball symbolized the movement of the heavenly bodies across the skies, and the mythology of the game was filled with struggle between gods.²⁸

In a perhaps basketball-like game, “these sport-like contests were generally staged on the open plains of valley floors, fought with wooden spears and bows and arrows, and surrounded with much pomp and enthusiasm.”²⁹ Most importantly, these games had a set of rules and were marked by attitudes of playfulness. As such, “these battles were an example of what anthropologist call ‘social warfare.’ Social wars, as opposed to economic wars, are not fought for taking over territory, capturing resources or subjugating people. They are about prestige, honor, revenge and entertainment.”³⁰

Historically, there have been many traditions with sacred games. “In Ancient Greece, the Olympic Games were held every four years in honor of the sky god Zeus, at the village of Olympia.”³¹ The games were not simple in nature. They sacralized the “fundamental principles of rule-bound contests, namely fairness and playing by the rules. In classical Rome, the sacred games were considered essential for the wellbeing of the state.”³²

The disciplines of history, archeology, anthropology, and literature concur that organized sports had religious origins wherever they are found in the ancient world. The most

²⁸ Andreas De Block and Siegfried Dewitte, “Darwinism and the Cultural Evolution of Sports,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 52 (2009): 1–16.

²⁹ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 17.

³⁰ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 17.

³¹ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 18.

³² Sheldrake, *Ways to God Beyond*, 18.

famous ancient religious rite associated with sports is...the Olympic Games, traditionally held to have started in 776 B.C. but which almost certainly began much earlier. They were consecrated to a number of Olympian 'gods'...notably Zeus, Apollo, and Gaea, and there were also sports festivals all over Ancient Greece consecrated to Hera, Athena, Ares, and other 'gods' and 'goddesses'...Ancient Rome was no different.³³

The sporting events were dedicated to the gods whose attributes or essence "represented the gifts necessary to win those events, and the act of competition was itself the crowning achievement of an esoteric discipline associated with a particular 'god' whose form and inner meaning both had religious significance."³⁴

The athletic games were a sacred part of "ancient polytheistic religions, since these polytheisms themselves must have been originally monotheistic in nature, athletic games were thus most probably originally an important part of the ancient primordial religions."³⁵ While there were many ritual dimensions to the games, other forms of "sacred sports" were practiced throughout antiquity.³⁶ The example of the Olympic Games makes clear the ritual and sacred aspects of sports. Sheldrake notes that "the modern Olympic Games are based on the ancient models, and although they are conducted in a secular spirit, they provide incentive that causes many thousands of people to train and aspire to their highest abilities."³⁷ Religiously speaking, many who participate pray and ask for God's blessings, or the blessings of their patron saints and deities.³⁸

³³ Mohammad, *Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*, 62–63.

³⁴ Mohammad, *Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*, 64.

³⁵ Mohammad, *Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*, 64.

³⁶ Mohammad, *Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*, 64–65.

³⁷ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 18.

³⁸ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 18.

All sports with rules or which involve training inherently also involve a certain amount of discipline and self-discipline. Likewise, “*agoge*, the cultural and educational system of ancient Sparta between the seventh and sixth centuries, enlisted sports as the central means to educate, to discipline, and to instill virtue and patriotism into the city’s youth and its citizenry at large.”³⁹ Interestingly, “although sports are not normally undertaken as spiritual exercises, they can have a range of spiritual effects...These effects include being intensely present and feeling part of something greater than oneself.”⁴⁰ This leads us to competition as being one of the unifiers beyond ourselves, Papineau points out that, “competition plays an important part in sport, because it enables people to measure themselves against others⁴¹: ‘To exercise skill is to want to do something *well*, indeed as well as feasible.’”⁴² The self-discipline required to do something well, coupled with strident competition, leads one into the flow-zone.

The Flow-Zone

Michael Murphy and Rhea White’s *The Psychic Side of Sports* discusses being in the zone as “a psychological space in which one’s performance seems supernormal.”⁴³ They explain,

The many reports we have collected show us that sport has enormous power to sweep us beyond the ordinary sense of self, to evoke capacities that have generally been regarded as mystical, occult, or religious. This is not to say that athletes are yogis or mystics...it is simply to recognize the similarities that exist between the two fields of activity, both in their methods and in the states of mind they both evoke.⁴⁴

³⁹ Mohammad, *Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*, 66.

⁴⁰ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 13.

⁴¹ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 12.

⁴² David Papineau, *Knowing the Score: What Sports Can Teach Us About Philosophy (and What Philosophy Can Teach Us About Sports)* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 237.

⁴³ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 5.

⁴⁴ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 6.

The zone is a place of oneness with self and the sacred. It is where the great seers of contemplative traditions have “explored the inner life more deeply than most of us, have opened up spiritual territories that we may or may not enter. But many athletes and adventurers have followed part way, however inadvertently, through the doorways of sport.”⁴⁵ Sport, of course, is not a religious discipline, but sports can enable experiences that mirror religious experiences in the sense of oneness and being intensely in the moment.⁴⁶

Sheldrake calls this phenomenon flow, drawing from Mihaly Csikszentmihayli’s seminal work on the subject. Sheldrake believes the “principles of group flow apply not only to teams themselves, but also to their supporters or fans, who are often linked together by their shared emotions, by chants, songs and collective moments.”⁴⁷ When this sort of cohesive energy is present, the “players are often affected very positively by being bathed in an atmosphere of support.”⁴⁸ Sheldrake also contends there is a shadow side to flow, such as people deriving pleasure from the violence or pain of competition (think boxing).

For example, “People derived pleasure in ancient Rome from seeing gladiators fight to the death, or Christians [being] devoured by lions....(yet) the positive effect of flow and its spiritual value depend on the context.”⁴⁹ Just as there is always balance in life, so too must there be balance when one is in the flow or the zone. In *Joy of Sports*, Novak argues that more than

⁴⁵ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 6.

⁴⁶ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 7.

⁴⁷ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 29.

⁴⁸ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 29.

⁴⁹ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 29–30.

conventional team wisdom happens when confidence spreads through a team as a result of being in the zone:

When a collection of individuals first jell as a team, truly begins to react as a five-headed or elven-headed unit rather than as an aggregate of five or elven individuals, you can almost hear the *click*: a new kind of reality comes into existence at a new level of human development. A basketball team, for example, can click into and out of this realty many times during the same game; and each player, as well as the coach, and the fans, can detect the difference...For those who have participated on a team that has known the click of communality, the experience is unforgettable, like that of having attained, for a while at least, a higher level of existence: existence as it ought to be.⁵⁰

While Sheldrake and Novak both point to flow, it was Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who first coined the term and described flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”⁵¹

Csikszentmihalyi and Jackson in *Flow in Sports: The Key to Optimal Experiences and Performances*, point to the “FundaMental” dimension of flow. The authors capitalize the M in fundamental to emphasize the importance of the mental factor in finding flow in sports. They insist that a particular mind-set opens us to the possibility for flow. Csikszentmihalyi and Jackson name the following nine fundamental components to flow as: “challenge and skill balance; action-awareness merging; clear goals; unambiguous feedback; concentration on the task at hand; sense of control; loss of self-consciousness; transformation of time; and autotelic experience.”⁵² As an athlete and deeply spiritual person, I resonate completely with his assertion and make connections to flow as the components of spiritual practices.

⁵⁰ Novak, *The Joy of Sports*, 143–44.

⁵¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 4.

⁵² Susan A. Jackson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow in Sports: The Keys to Optimal Experiences and Performances* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1999), 16.

Challenge and skill must maintain a balance in sports; knowing is not enough for challenges to equal skill. Both are needed to extend and stretch to new levels. Just as “being able to convert stressors into challenge”⁵³ is necessary, so too is balance the key for flow for an athlete, just as it is a primary focus in spiritual practices. For an athlete, the merging of action and awareness is when one feels at one with the movements one is making, a oneness that does not require much effort when one is experiencing flow. As a former basketball player, this merging of oneness is something I felt with my teammates, or when the ball felt like an extension of my arm and of my mind. Such oneness is feeling totally absorbed. Nothing could divide my attention or myself; everything was smooth and easy. This action-awareness merging was nothing short of a holistic experience. Both whether in sports or in spiritual practices, having clear goals that direct action and provide focus is essential. This blueprint sets the stage for flow to happen.

To this end, unambiguous feedback, both in an athlete and a spiritual practitioner, can be found in the body itself, as a “form of kinesthetic awareness or knowledge,”⁵⁴ or as external feedback. This kinesthetic awareness is part of the embodiment of being a player. It is the essence of moving the body during the sport that allows for flow. The external feedback may come from a coach for an athlete, or from a spiritual director for a spiritual practitioner, both providing feedback to help the participant achieve their goals. Such direction prompts one to

⁵³ Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow in Sports*, 17.

⁵⁴ Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow in Sports*, 22.

concentrate on the task at hand. “Focus in flow is complete and purposeful, with no extraneous thoughts.”⁵⁵ We see this in spiritual practices where concentration is key.

Athletes are well known for their ability to be focused. This is also an emphasis for spiritual practices. To be sure, learning to discard irrelevant thoughts from consciousness and tune into the present moment can be difficult for people new to spiritual practices. Here sports practices can aid and inform spiritual practices. I have stood alone on the foul line shooting free throws with distracting fans waving their arms and streamers, shouting through megaphones, roaring, hissing, and in all manner of ways trying to distract me. The concentration I used on the foul line in the face of these distractions is the exact same concentration I use in spiritual practices such as body relaxation meditations, Centering Prayer, and *lectio divina*.

Csikszentmihalyi and Jackson name a sense of control as a component of flow, and this can also be articulated as confidence. When confident, athletes do not worry about failure, they trust completely their skill honed from extensive practice. Likewise, persons who engage in spiritual practices have confidence in the process of transformation. By so doing, athletes and spiritual practitioners learn to free themselves from self-concern and self-doubt. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi remind us that a “loss of consciousness is an empowering characteristic” and that “after the flow experience, the perception of self is stronger and more positive.”⁵⁶

For athletes, and advanced spiritual practitioners, the loss of self-consciousness becomes instinctual to the point of seeming to transform time—losing a sense of ordinary time, which is a byproduct of total concentration. This leads to the culmination of the preceding components of flow—an “autotelic experience.” “‘Autotelic’ derives from two Greek words, *auto* meaning self,

⁵⁵ Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow in Sports*, 25.

⁵⁶ Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow in Sports*, 27.

and *telos* meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward.”⁵⁷ Said another way, an autotelic experience for athletes translates into playing for the love of the game, for “the high” one feels from a peak performance. This is seen spiritually as expanding our consciousness through the cultivation of spiritual practices, the reward being groundedness, connection to Source, self, earth, and others. I contend that this is akin to winning in sports. It is also a possible place of entry for spiritual formation.

Flow is a dynamic rather than static state. I believe God is also dynamic. Increased flow activity leads to increased skill, challenge, and complexity. I posit that skill, challenge, and complexity are part and parcel of spiritual formation. Sports, whether with oneself or an opponent, continually inspires one to face increasing challenges. Similarly, spiritual practices offer us the unique opportunity to expand our connection to Source and self by enhancing our awe, wonder, and enjoyment. The way to experience peak performances in sports is to engage in flow; likewise, the way to experience the Mystery is to engage flow. Therefore, sports as spiritual practice offers us another way to engage flow, engage the Holy, engage ourselves and others. So, if it true that an autotelic state is akin to states of spiritual consciousness, then it can be rightly said that sports as a spiritual practice is one way to achieve spiritual formation. And besides, it’s fun! Who said engaging the Sacred could not be fun and enjoyable?

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that by considering activities such as sports, “it becomes easier to understand what makes people happy.”⁵⁸ For Csikszentmihalyi, challenges are necessary for full flourishing to occur. Therefore, he suggests that one way to find challenges is to enter a

⁵⁷ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 67.

⁵⁸ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 50.

competitive situation—but with a twist: this time the purpose is to produce complexity, whereby our antagonist becomes our helper. Hence, having defined competition as a “striving with,” I suggest that competition is beneficial because it fosters and sharpens skills, through satisfaction and enjoyment, that promote and enhance formational becoming, spiritually and otherwise.

This is a spiritual experience happening in the midst of sports. To be one with yourself and your team, or community, is one of the deepest, most enchanting spiritual practices. For me, as a point guard, sensory clues are fundamental to rapport. Intuitively, at any instant I seem to know all positions on the floor and what each player is going to do next. It is the result of vigilance, concentration, excellent peripheral vision, and hours of training. It has been my experience as a player and coach that “teams are social groups in which individual members become like a single organism to achieve a common goal, [and that] then those bonds can serve as channels as telepathic communication, as in other groups.”⁵⁹ For these and other reasons, the bonds that form between teammates lead to a contagious confidence that spreads throughout the team and fans, which often propel the team toward victory, even in the most improbable situations. This is what is meant by “being in the zone.”

Many have said it may have been the greatest basketball game—for men or women—ever played in E.A. Diddle Arena, and I was a part of it. The arena at that time held 13,508 and it is estimated that for the Western Kentucky University vs. University of Texas women’s basketball game there were over 10,000 fans in the arena that night. That’s right 10,000 people to watch a women’s basketball game in 1985. Thirty-five years later, I can *still feel* the electricity of that night. Literally, my body responds to the mere memory. Moreover, even now when I speak to people in the Bowling Green community that were at the game, they relive it with the same

⁵⁹ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 28.

energy and excitement as when it happened. Let me begin by explaining the context, historical consciousness, and memory that lingers, a memory of being in the zone, of being caught up in the flow, not only among players and coaches but also among the fans that were present and for the community at large.

It was the 1985 semi-final game of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Mid-East Regional tournament, the Sweet Sixteen, held at WKU. The teams were seeded one-four, the number one seed was University of Texas, coached by Jody Conradt. My team, Western Kentucky, coached by Paul Sanderford, was the number four seed. The number two seed was Ole Miss (University of Mississippi), coached by the famed Van Chancellor. The number three seed was the historic and most famed women's basketball team of all time, the University of Tennessee, coached by the greatest women's basketball coach of all-time, the legendary Pat Head Summitt. The winner of the Mid-East Regional would advance to the Final Four. To add more drama to the situation, the Final Four was to be held in Austin, Texas, on the home floor of the University of Texas.

Fans of the Lady Longhorns were waiting for them to come home and win the National Championship. My teammates and I would be the thorn in their side. We would be the unexpected and uninvited guest a week later in Austin. Yet, in true Southern hospitality, Lady Longhorn fans smiled and tolerated our presence, and were gracious hosts in spite of the pain and disappointment of their beloved daughters not being at the table—excuse me, on the floor. What added more drama, suspense, and magnitude to the game was that on each team was more than one All-American, many of whom would go on to establish the American Basketball League (ABL), the first women's professional basketball league, the precursor to the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Lillie Mason and I were the two All-Americans on

the WKU team. The Mid-East Regional showcased the very best players in the game, an experience the spectators would remember for a lifetime.

A few years later I would encounter one of my (s)heroes, the first African American woman Texas Senator and a United States House Representative, Barbara Jordan. By 1985 she had retired and was an adjunct professor at the University of Texas. After hearing my name, her first comment to me was, “You beat my Lady Longhorns!” She was a loyal and fierce women’s basketball fan, most especially of the University of Texas team. Even Barbara Jordan remembered that night in March 1985. The drama of the game? Why so much electricity? Why so suspenseful? It was about more than just an upset: it was *how* it happened. Here is how the WKU faithful recount that game:

It was a battle from beginning to end. The Lady Longhorns led 48–43 at the half. With seconds to play and the score knotted up at 90–90, Texas called a timeout to set up its defense after the Longhorns deflected a Western Kentucky University pass out of bounds in front of the Topper bench. WKU (with no timeouts left), not the Longhorns, who turned out to be the benefactor of that pause in the action. Sanderford elected to use a play the Lady Toppers had practiced, but never used. Clemette Haskins was the decoy out front, when Kami Thomas inbounded the ball to Lillie Mason who had posted up just below the free line on the near side of the floor. Thomas' pass was perfect. Mason took the toss, pivoted on her left foot and went up for the shot. The Lady Toppers pulled the highly improbable upset, defeating #1 Texas to earn a berth in the NCAA regional championship game two days later. Mason (26 points and 14 rebounds) and Haskins (26 points and three assists) led the Toppers...Andrea Lloyd led the Lady Longhorns with 20 points and 19 rebounds. After the drama and suspense of the Texas game, not many people remember that regional title game two days later in Diddle Arena, a game that pitted the Toppers against Coach Van Chancellor’s #6 Ole Miss. It was another classic, and another victory for WKU—this one by a 72–68 count (in front of a crowd of 6,500 fans, undoubtedly energized by the win over Texas). That triumph punched the Lady Toppers' ticket to the Final Four in Austin!

While the details above give a recount of what happened, I do not remember any of the 26 points I scored or the assists I dished, but I remember in slow motion the last seconds of the game. I remember the *feeling*, I remember the exultation, joy, frenzy (if you will) of the *communitas*.

That *feeling* is very close, if not the same, as witnessing famous sites on pilgrimages. I had not felt that type of electricity in an arena again until I visited the Colosseum in Rome in 2018. On that day in March 1985, I had been on the winning team. But I have also had my share of being on the losing end of those experiences and thus feel compassionately toward those who feel the lingering pain associated with loss. There are life lessons in both. Here is what Texas Coach Conradt retrospectively had to say about her experience:

Speaking of life lessons...in 1985 the University of Texas was scheduled to hold the Women's Final Four. 'Tickets had been sold, we were ranked and seeded number one. It was all set for us to enjoy a real special moment.' However, basketball has a way of surprising even the best prepared. With a buzzer-beating shot, Western Kentucky eliminated Coach Conradt and her Lady Longhorns by a score of 92–90. 'Nothing was more devastating [than] to know that we had disappointed thousands of fans...' The following preseason, Conradt noted a totally different motivation level of her players and coaching staff. 'It was all total and complete unified focus to get past that horrible feeling from the year before, and as a result they went 34–0...I have my doubts whether or not they would have gone undefeated had it not been for living through the failure and adversity of the previous season.'⁶⁰

Wisdom is best gleaned from the opportunities we have from being in the flow/zone. It allows us the space to gain perspective and to appreciate the ways in which we engage a certain spirituality while participating in sports.

Murphy and White contend that there are certain elements of being in the zone that involve “transcendent feelings commonly described by artists, mystics, lovers—and also by athletes.”⁶¹ They involve: acute well-being, peace, calm, stillness, detachment; freedom, floating, flying weightlessness; ecstasy; power, control; being in the present; instinctive action and surrender; mystery and awe; feelings of immortality; and unity.⁶² “[T]he athlete’s self-awareness

⁶⁰ Christine A. Baker, *When She Plays: The World of Women's Basketball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 66–67.

⁶¹ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 11–36.

⁶² Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 11–36.

in peak moments often differs radically from his or her everyday sense of self. There is a feeling of detachment—not only from self and from the surroundings, but also from the results of his or her performance.”⁶³ There are also experiences of “becoming lighter of being weightless, or of rising in the air, which bear a strong resemblance to the experience of mystical ecstasy, in which the feeling of being outside oneself [, of feeling freedom or weightlessness,] is a primary feature.”⁶⁴

Being able to see oneself from the outside is a form of ecstasy.⁶⁵ Such experiences go hand in hand with feeling in the zone. There is also the experience of power and control through “self-mastery and a sense of power” as the “supreme rewards of sports”⁶⁶:

In some cases the power does not seem to originate in oneself but from the outside...at other times, it wells up from within. When this sense of power happens frequently enough so that it can be expected to recur and its coming can be counted on, it is transformed into a feeling of invincibility. At its fullest, the feeling of being in control is a unifying experience involving the athlete’s entire sense of self, the environment, and even his [her] destiny. A sustained feeling of power develops into a sense of being in control, which contributes to the “high” often experienced in sport.⁶⁷

Being present is another experience felt by successful athletes. I certainly felt it during the Texas game. Murphy and White explain that when athletes are performing their best, “they are immersed in the present moment, totally involved in whatever confronts them...when athletes are truly immersed in the present, they are totally unaware of distractions....the single minded concentration...an awareness of being in ‘another world.’”⁶⁸

⁶³ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 16.

⁶⁴ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, 20.

⁶⁵ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 21.

⁶⁶ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 23.

⁶⁷ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 23–25.

⁶⁸ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 25–26.

As regards instinctive action and surrender, we understand it later as the “lesser known, unknown, unconscious aspect—the state that can be recalled only after the play has been made, when the athlete talks about being, ‘unconscious,’ ‘out of my mind,’ ‘in the twilight zone,’ ‘out of my gourd,’ playing ‘over my head’ (or) ‘it was instinct.’”⁶⁹ Many athletes attribute this to muscle memory, to the body/mind instinctively taking over and the athlete does not know what happened. It was instinct. In the zone, one also has experiences of mystery and awe that leave athletes feeling like “they are treading on sacred ground—or even that the divine has invaded their lives.”⁷⁰

These experiences are coupled with feelings of immortality, of “a sense of one’s endless bodily strength, or ... the awareness of being a link in a never-ending chain of being, or ... part of a spiritual essence that cannot die.”⁷¹ And lastly, when players are in the zone (flow) they have experiences of deep unity, “a union of mind and body; a sense of oneness with one’s teammates; and in the highest reaches of experience, a feeling of unity with the cosmos...Sometimes athletes feel at one with his or her immediate natural surroundings.”⁷² The zone is ground that is ripe for spiritual formation and experience. It is where one gets in tune with oneself and one’s surroundings while at the same time being able to tune out all manner of distraction. It is the perfect balance of presence.

Post-Game I Chapter Outline

⁶⁹ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 27.

⁷⁰ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 29–32.

⁷¹ Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 73.

⁷² Murphy and White, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, 35.

In sports vernacular, I call it scouting. I embrace the history of the Black church while queering its very nature, and thus expand the conversation beyond the traditional Black church context. In womanist scholarship, I distance myself from the traditional Black church paradigm and instead embrace Walker's mysticism. I enter the conversation as a queer womanist athlete—another intersection that has been overlooked in scholarship. My womanist lineage is Alice Walker, Barbara Holmes, and Melanie Harris; to me, they embody the essence of what it means to embrace a womanist spirituality. Because existing scholarship does not investigate the intersection of spirituality and sports, I am queering this field. In the field of spiritual formation, the lived experiences of Black women have been largely overlooked and dismissed. When our lives have been taken into account it has been only through the lens of the Black church. This is no longer acceptable as the makeup of the academy shifts. In these ways *Queer and Queering: A Womanist Spirituality of Sports* speaks to the important gaps in spiritual formation and sports.

Chapter 3 considers autoethnography as a methodology by defining what it is; how it is used in the field of practical theology; its critiques and challenges; ethics and values, and its contributions to further the voices of those on the margins of scholarship in practical theology spiritual formation. Narrative research, as a method, “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived stories of individuals.”⁷³ In this case I am the individual who has lived experiences in both arenas and is sharing them to critique culture and dismantle and change existing norms. While this approach is not chronological, it is themed based. The main metaphor I use to arrange my stories is pilgrimage. It is in the various pilgrimages in my life that I have seen sports play the most integral role. I engage and critique societal and religious norms through critical theological

⁷³ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 70.

reflection based on team, community, spirituality, and failure. I grew up with an intense leaning towards sports and it is a major thread running throughout my life.

In Chapter 4, The “I” in Team: Sports and Spiritual Pilgrimage, is an autoethnographic exploration of spirituality and sports and the ways in which they are intertwined. Within Chapter 4, I show how autoethnography can be used as a method to explore spiritual formation in sports. The wisdom I have gained from the transformational aspects of my spiritual and sports journey are evident in the laboratory of my life. There I discovered clues that led me to greater awareness of the interconnectedness and interrelationality of all people and Earth, and most poignantly, with myself. Sports have been the vehicle for my spiritual formation and also a spiritual practice for me. It has been on the court that I deepened my connection with God, play, teamwork, and good ethics. This chapter leans heavily on the work of Dr. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook’s scholarship on pilgrimage as I recall the pilgrimages of my life.

Chapter 5 traces my introduction to mindfulness through sports and recalls the work of sports psychology with my collegiate team. It also considers the compassion practice work of Dr. Frank Rogers Jr. in my construction of a Point Guard Spirituality that considers what it means to “see the wind” while simultaneously be at one with oneself, the sacred, and one’s community. Moreover, it leans into the ways in which God can “live and move and have being” through play—and in this case specifically sports. This chapter concludes with my construction of QWEST as a framework for using Point Guard Spirituality in, and as a way for, spiritual formation.

CHAPTER 2

The Scouting Report: Literature Review

Pre-Game II

Scholarship in the areas of practical theology and spiritual formation include little about black women's experience. Insofar as black women nonetheless have been formed spiritually by culture and context, it is necessary to highlight the voids in this academic field. Womanism is an attempt to explicate and voice black women's lived experiences, perhaps the fields of spiritual formation and practical theology have not taken this into account.

To date, most conversations and scholarship about black women's experiences come out of and draw from experience in the Black church and womanist frameworks. This dissertation offers an alternative. Noting that many of those who have drawn on womanism have ignored that Alice Walker's experience, spiritual formation, and description of womanism is founded on queerness, I put queerness front and center in this dissertation. Moreover, because in scholarship on spiritual formation black women's stories have been used in superficial ways, and have largely not included the voices of queer black women or of athletes, this dissertation foregrounds these three sources or locations.

Consequently, the guiding questions of my research were: How do Black Christian persons engage the Sacred (God) and construct values and ethics *outside the traditional Black church*? What does theological language look like for black people who are spiritual but not religious, and/or spiritual and religious, and neither case attached to the denominational structures of a church? Finally, is there a place within Black Christian faith to embrace multi-faith individuals and families?

Womanism is Spirituality not Religion

One leading scholar who *does* understand Alice Walker's intentions is Nagueyalti Warren, the Professor of Pedagogy in African American Studies at Emory University. She has taught literature and seminars for thirty years on Alice Walker's work. For Warren, "Walker's oeuvre, from its beginning, presents a metaphysical interpretation of life."⁷⁴ "Even her politics and activism reveal a metaphysical and deeply spiritual essence."⁷⁵

Walker does not embrace Christology, such as the womanist theologians discuss, Jesus is both human and Divine, as is everything. Life is everlasting. It changes form; therefore, people and all things appear to die only to transition into another form, in what some may see as reincarnation, although Walker herself does not use the term.⁷⁶

Warren continues: "Her collective works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and children's books often shift the paradigm from a dualistic perception of life as good and evil to a forward-looking and optimistic view for those readers brave enough to remain open to the infinite possibilities."⁷⁷ As such it is clear the message from her work is that we live in a spiritual universe. Everything is Spirit. We are all connected through divine energy and spark. Warren posits,

Walker's work pushes the boundaries to insist that *we* include humans, plants, animals, the earth, water, the air. Her concept of God, a word with Christian connotations, is more often referred to as Great Spirit, situating it closer to Native American and other traditional beliefs. In Walker's works, Spirit is love, pure and unadulterated. This loving Spirit is alive, omnipresent, and awaits our recognition. No judgmental God in heaven waits for us to die, kills us, or condemns us to an everlasting hell.⁷⁸

Womanism has indeed been misused by the indoctrination of the Black church paradigm.

⁷⁴ Nagueyalti Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), xi.

⁷⁵ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics*, xii.

⁷⁶ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics*, xii.

⁷⁷ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics*, xii.

⁷⁸ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics*, xii.

Walker's original intention was not to collaborate with patriarchal systems. Instead, it was to hold something *other* as an alternative to it.

It is from this misunderstanding that womanist scholarship has been built on the unintended principles of Walker's womanism. Insofar as womanist theology has been used to uphold the some traditions of the Black church, that was not Walker's intention. Therefore, womanist theology has not been holding to the true tenets of womanism. Walker does not privilege the Bible as holy, but respects books in general.⁷⁹ She sees earth as holy.⁸⁰

Walker dramatizes life through a comic rather than a tragic lens...Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to exposure of fallibility.⁸¹ Walker exposes evil as erroneous thoughts and actions. Human agency as choice dominates her works. The agency that some people want to ascribe to God or to the devil belongs entirely to human beings. Within the comic paradigm, a moral ambiguity exists, whereas in tragedy a schism emerges between good and evil with no room for ambiguity. No open-ended possibilities are available.⁸²

In light of her experience and scholarship, Walker is a present-day mystic. If, as Margaret Furse claims, "the mystic experiences Spirit as immediate and present in all things,"⁸³ then mysticism, Warren rightly claims, "is a worldview that aligns with Walker's writings."⁸⁴ Gerda Lerner has written that what the mystic knows appears in a variety of ways. She states:

Some mystics' visions amount to a coherent theological system, others are fragmentary and unsystematic. Some build upon biblical and traditional ritual imagery; others are

⁷⁹ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, xii.

⁸⁰ Warren, 175.

⁸¹ Stephen O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 68.

⁸² Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, xii.

⁸³ Margaret Furse, *Mysticism: Windows on a Worldview* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977).

⁸⁴ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, xii.

astonishingly original in concept and symbolism. Mystics used whatever materials their own lives could provide.⁸⁵

Walker writes from her lived experience, illuminating issues of both race and gender while drawing heavily from her lived experience as a black girl growing up in the segregated South. “Like nineteenth-century black women mystics Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry, and Rebecca Jackson, Walker has stunned organized religion with her independence. Her eclectic theology and claim to be pagan embrace Spirit wherever she finds it.”⁸⁶ This is not the traditional womanist theology we have come to know. Given Walker’s pagan location, it is clear we must take into account her own lived experience.

All-Star Legends of Womanism

“The term *womanist* was coined by Walker, yet *womanism* became a movement when Black women scholars of religion began to reconcile theoretical/theological reflection to social transformation which would forever change the way they constructed knowledge and the way knowledge constructed them.”⁸⁷ According to Stacey Floyd-Thomas,

As a result of two decades of writings, scholarly debate, teaching, and administrative leadership, the development of womanism has produced three generations of womanist. A common understanding of a womanist is that she is a Black woman committed to defying the compounded forces of oppression (namely racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism) that threaten her self-actualization as well as the survival of her community.⁸⁸

Floyd-Thomas continues,

⁸⁵ Gerda Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 106.

⁸⁶ Warren, *Alice Walker’s Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, xiii.

⁸⁷ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, “Writing for Our Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4.

“

⁸⁸ Floyd-Thomas, “Writing for Our Lives” 4.

The matriarchs or forerunners of womanist scholarship Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams introduced this new concept to the academy and birthed a collective enterprise. A first generation of womanist scholarship emerged, including Shawn Copeland, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Renita Weems, Diana Hayes, Clarice Martin, Toinette Eugene, Jamie Phelps, Emilie Townes, and Marcia Riggs. These scholars influenced the second generation of womanists, like Kelly Brown Douglas, Linda Thomas, Karen Baker Fletcher, Chery Kirk-Duggan, Barbara Holmes, Joan Martin, Rosetta Ross, and Daphne Wiggins who advanced the theological constructions of their predecessors.⁸⁹

Warren highlights Walker's mysticism as running counter to womanist theology.⁹⁰ Agreeing with Warren, Melanie Harris points out that "womanist theological scholarship has given little attention to Walker's own spiritual and ethical voice. Little exploration of Walker's reference to herself as a 'womanist woman-loving,'⁹¹ sexually and nonsexually, including her bisexuality—has taken place."⁹² Harris, also questions why womanist theologians and ethicists have not taken seriously Walker's claim to paganism, which Walker defines as a "lover of the land, one who respects the divinity of the earth, especially as a descendant of a long line of farmers."⁹³

In contrast, "Katie G. Cannon chose the term womanist to define black feminist theology, but critics point out [that], at least in the beginning, Cannon's focus was far removed from Walker's expansive vision."⁹⁴ In 1985, Cannon stated that "In essence, the Bible is the highest

⁸⁹ Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives," 4.

⁹⁰ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, 175.

⁹¹ Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 85.

⁹² Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, 175.

⁹³ Alice Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms)," in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (New York: Ballantine, 1997), 25.

⁹⁴ Warren, *Alice Walker's Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, 176.

source of authority for most Black women.”⁹⁵ Proclamations such as this one caused critics to claim that “Cannon attempts to Christianize the term *womanist* when it is non-Christian. For many black women the Bible is not the ‘highest source of authority,’”⁹⁶ While Walker would be such a woman for which the Bible is not the highest authority, Walker—Loves the Spirit.”⁹⁷ To be fair, Cannon would later expand her definition to embrace more than Christian, heterosexual ethics.⁹⁸

Walker’s definition is at odds with Christian doctrine...The problem is not that Walker’s definition fails to mention the Christian God, but instead, says Spirit, her definition gives too much attention to the sexual, embraces homosexuality, and does not privilege heterosexuality...Walker’s stance is too nontraditional for many Christian adherents to embrace fully.⁹⁹

Whether one chooses the term *womanist*, “Walker’s definition clearly has influenced black women theologians who over the years have grown to embrace much more of Walker’s mystical theology than when it first began.”¹⁰⁰

As a continuation of this mystical theological embrace, Holmes enters. In her book, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently*, she states, “Liberation will not be found in utopian theological models, legal mandates, or social engineering projects...it will need language that includes clues about a complex universe that is wondrous and rife with

⁹⁵ Cannon, Katie G., *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 56.

⁹⁶ Warren, *Alice Walker’s Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, 176

⁹⁷ Warren, *Alice Walker’s Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit* 176.

⁹⁸ Katie G. Cannon, “Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority,” in *Loving the Black Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 11–30.

⁹⁹ Warren, *Alice Walker’s Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, 176.

¹⁰⁰ Warren, *Alice Walker’s Metaphysics: Literature of Spirit*, 177.

uncertainty.”¹⁰¹ She calls for an awakening to the “vibrant and mysterious worlds of quantum physics and cosmology...to rethink the dynamics of race relations within the broader context of the cosmos.”¹⁰² In this way, “The journey toward wholeness and community is a healing voyage for those who have lost primal connections or who by virtue of gender, sexuality, or race are deemed to be peripheral.”¹⁰³ Holmes’ womanism stretches far beyond Cannon’s womanism and holds more tightly to Walker’s original mission by her connection to the healing voyage.

Through such ideas, Holmes is advocating for a construction of community that embraces science as well as theology, a gathering of folks she refers to as “a community called beloved”¹⁰⁴—a site where people seek and do justice because they remember all of their connections: cosmic, social, and divine.¹⁰⁵ It is with the connection of the cosmic, social, and divine that we recognize Holmes’ values that guide the scientific methodologies of ethnic people, values such as that the human family is connected to the Spirit; reality is relational; and that human beings are “partners with the source of life.”¹⁰⁶ Holmes speaks of an interconnected universe that invites and requires communal contemplation:

We respond to a deeply interdependent and responsive universe through shared experiences. This means that despite signs of postmodern fragmentation and the rise of radical individualism, we cannot carve out shared destinies in isolation. We are born not only into a wondrous and mysterious life space but also into communities of interpersonal reliance. These communities of care and crisis lend meaning and congruence to our lives and help to shape our collective stories. These stories and learned

¹⁰¹ Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 3.

¹⁰² Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, 3.

¹⁰³ Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Holmes *Race and the Cosmos*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, 77–78.

practices disclose the pitfalls and potential for human fulfillment, but more importantly, they describe a cosmos that is interwoven with mystery.¹⁰⁷

And it is here that we find Holmes' womanism comes alive in the true spirit of Walker's mystic and pagan location. Holmes notes the genesis of her womanist theology. It is born of darkness, but that darkness mothers and nurtures us:

The phrase 'The world was dark and void' is not an indictment. It is an indication of the state of the universe in the beginning. In the beginning there is darkness. It is the womb out of which we are born, a genesis space for 'Let there be' and nurture. This is a mothering darkness that nurses its offspring.¹⁰⁸

Holmes moves beyond Eurocentric approaches to understanding God, community, and ourselves.

It is in this expanded view of community that Holmes defines contemplative practices. Communal contemplative practices of the Black church, Holmes notes, "provide an interpretive grid that synthesizes inner and outer cosmologies. It is the community and not the individual monastic that becomes the concern."¹⁰⁹ She continues,

The spiritual practices become public theology through acts of shared liturgical discernment. These acts of shared contemplation move individual mystical events from the personal and private toward the public and pragmatic. Accordingly, the inward journey transcends the private imagination to become an expanded communal testimony.¹¹⁰

Turning to the communal contemplative gaze in the historic Black church, Holmes contends that "communal contemplation is richer than the immediacy of personal experience because the experience, the story, the event is subjected to the gaze of both the individual and the

¹⁰⁷ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xv.

¹⁰⁸ Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*, 102–3.

¹⁰⁹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xv–xvi.

¹¹⁰ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xv–xvi.

community.”¹¹¹ From a young age in Africana—relating to African history and culture—as well as other indigenous cultures, there is a unique orientation toward the sacred elements of life. In those elements, “Children soon learn that when events surprise, frighten, or mystify them, they can face the unknown with a discerning community.”¹¹²

While Holmes’ womanism is provocative, it is still highly connected to the Black church. I ask, “Is there room for Black spiritual formation outside of the Black church?” Another question, “Is there room for individual contemplation outside of the Black community?” Holmes would say yes. Continuing the conversation about community Holmes states,

It has only taken a few generations to lose sight of this integral aspect of Africana community life. Such losses can result from inclusion/integration into dominant cultural paradigms. The price for full acceptance is often cultural and spiritual amnesia. Moreover, communal contemplation takes focus, centering, energy, and concentration. These are orientations that tend to be displaced in the struggle for upward mobility. The price of inclusion turns out to be the loss of the communal reflective gaze, the interpretive moment, the pause for a fresh wind of the Spirit... The contemplative practices of the black church are steeped in the stories of transcendence and transformation that have the potential to reinvigorate community life and to flesh out the character of black humanity with phenomenological detail and communal wisdom. I am offering an understanding of contemplation that depends upon an intense mutuality, shared religious imagination, and the free flow of interpretation within the context of a vibrant and lived theology. Lived theology is a contextual and dialogical process that is always enhanced by a responsive and collegial community.¹¹³

And so, it is here that we find again the use of womanist theology—womanist discourse—in the context of the Black church. Holmes however attempts to extend the conversation outward from the Black church to include the Black cultural milieu.

¹¹¹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xvi.

¹¹² Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xvi.

¹¹³ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xvi.

For example, using Black popular culture to address community and ways in which we are formed outside of the Black church, Holmes uses Kendrick Lamar to discuss his political voice as a rap/hip-hop artist:

Kendrick Lamar offers *To Pimp a Butterfly*, a political reply to police violence and the inherent power within the community to resist, redefine, and defeat racism, against all odds. Lamar seems to be saying that the power of survival is in our tongues. What he offers is more powerful than the songs of overcoming or reward in heaven. He says, ‘we gonna be alright.’ The refrain is repeated in a hard rhythm that reassures until the anthem becomes ‘aaaaaaaawwww . . . ite.’ This is a promise of ‘alrightness’ enunciated in the language of the ancestors and abiding spirits. Lamar’s musical reassurance, rhythms and lyrics are grounded in twenty-first-century culture and in the hymnal legacy of the black church, *Blessed Assurance Jesus is Mine, I Surrender All*. The message is clear: do your part, work while it is yet day, knowing that we may not see the victory over oppression, but victory will come, and in the meantime, we gonna be alright. The ancestors must be laughing: How could we have forgotten so easily that prophets like Lamar and Tupac arise in every generation? While we recognized this truism in the past, we didn’t expect a contemplative artistic revolution to arise from within the ranks of the millennials. Most of them grew up in the era of ‘opportunity,’ when Jim Crow was either dead or on life support. But with the rise of police and vigilante killings of black men and women came the art and performance of resistance from the millennial generation. The rappers are our twenty-first-century griots, telling the stories that need to be told, reminding the community of its history and potential, while chanting desperation and hope. Jon Michael Spencer calls rap messages ‘the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.’¹¹⁴

For Holmes, spiritual formation happens both within and outside the Black church context. This is an important positionality from a second-generation womanist. Holmes asks where rap artists, poets, and other oppressed people gain their knowledge. In other words, epistemologically, who holds their stories and how are their stories contemplative, informative, and formational?

Holmes asserts, “these children grew up watching television and the clear class divisions depicted there, but they also watched their parents try to assimilate or integrate.”¹¹⁵ They watched the struggle increase within the under/lower-class as the, “black middle class eschewed

¹¹⁴ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 194–95.

¹¹⁵ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 195.

communal values in favor of inclusion in oppressive systems.”¹¹⁶ In her claim she notes that they have been, “cloistered” all of their lives in the midst of their community:

They do not have to retreat to an isolated area like the desert mothers or fathers to consider their lives; instead they are isolated by boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They find no comfort in churches focused on upward mobility, college degrees, and suburban homes. Rap offers an inverted reality structure that redefines what is naughty and what is nice. Like blues and jazz musicians before them, rappers speak of sex casually but value family connections.¹¹⁷

Holmes’ claims that spiritual formation happens both within and, in a growing number of contexts, outside of the Black church tradition. This is where Holmes and Walker align—as Walker never intended to be appropriated by the Black church.

Jay McDaniel, philosopher and theologian, names a number of key points to remember about Holmes’ spirituality and spiritual formation:

1. Is an artist-at-heart in the theopoetic tradition. She synthesizes inner and outer cosmologies, social justice and arts, contemplation and action – guided by wisdom from African and African American life and culture. She presents the cosmos as a vast network of multi-dimensional inter-becoming and reminds us that we humans carry within our lives the myriad influences of such becoming: some visible (people, animals, and the earth) and some invisible (the voices of ancestors and spirits). She believes that the divine mystery within and beyond creation is also a living spirit within creation, present everywhere, in ‘secular’ as well as ‘sacred’ settings; develops a theology of contemplative liberation from this vision, centered in a sense of mystery.
2. Knows that life comes to us whole: a symphony of incongruities. We encounter the multiple presences of the universe, at home and in the workplace, of course, but also in dreams, in memory, in imagination, in stories. They come in sounds as well as words, feelings as well as ideas, movements of the body as well as act of the mind. We can talk about them, and we can also dance to them, and with them, and from them. Some of what we dance to is delightful and exuberant, some is painful and soul-denying.
3. Moves past a dichotomy between secular and sacred. The spirit is not in church alone, God is also in BB King, Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, and tap dancing. From her perspective, the presence of the spirit in life includes the secular and the sacred, and the very dichotomy is deceptive, because the living spirit is like the wind, blowing wherever it will.
4. Offers a fresh and more relational way of understanding the contemplative side of religious life. In our expression of the many in our lives, we simultaneously awaken to

¹¹⁶ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 195.

¹¹⁷ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 196.

our own inner reality that is who we are, as many becoming one. This awakening, however momentary, is a moment of what she would call ‘contemplation.’ She is keenly aware of the fact that, for many in Eurocentric traditions, contemplation tends to be a solitary spiritual activity that a person does “alone” in some deep way and amid ‘silence.’ She does not reject this. But she also shows that contemplation can emerge in, and indeed be, a communal activity, in which we are, in her words, ‘occupying a space of your own in community with others.’

5. Challenges any homogenizing and essentializing understandings of identity, including racial identity. And as we live out our ever-evolving identities, those identities are never reducible to any of the voices, or to our own sense of ‘identity.’ We are always more than we imagine. In some occasions of our lives, we come to understand and feel this more-ness. We realize that we ourselves are not simply individuals but also communal selves.

6. Shows how pain becomes hope: ‘making a way of no way.’ She shows how creative transformation invites and often requires a ‘ritual reversion’ of the past, including past traumas, into fresh possibilities for the future. ‘What has been an instrument of physical and psychic abuse is not the call to worship, a beckoning to the ancestors who have sprawled under the lash, a reminder that ‘trouble doesn’t last always.’¹¹⁸

Holmes believes, “These artistic genres are contemplative because they ignite memories of the awe and wonder that we tend to discard after childhood. Art also carves pathways toward our inner isles of spirituality. When we decide to live in our heads only, we become isolated from the God who is closer than our next breath.”¹¹⁹ She continues, “For some, the call to worship comes as joy spurts from jazz riffs, wonder thunders from tappers’ feet, as we ponder Lamar’s prophetic insolence and Beyoncé’s black girl magic. Each artistic moment is just slightly beyond our horizon of understanding.”¹²⁰ And thus, from the lineage of Holmes, contemporary womanist theologian Harris enters—though she does not explicitly name Holmes as being her ‘ancestor.’

Contemporary All-Star Womanists

¹¹⁸ Jay McDaniel, “Barbara Holmes: A Mentor for Our Times,” Academic, June 4, 2018, <https://www.openhorizons.org/barbara-holmes-a-mentor-for-our-times.html>.

¹¹⁹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 198.

¹²⁰ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 198.

In her essay, *Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic*, Harris sheds light on the lack of attention that “womanist theological scholarship has given to Alice Walker’s own religious and ethical voice.”¹²¹ Harris continues, “limited careful analysis of Walker’s nonfiction work revealing her own religious and ethical perspectives has been conducted in the field of womanist theology and ethics.”¹²²

Alice Walker is a self-proclaimed pagan. In her essay, ‘The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven,’ she explains paganism as an Earth-centered religion and writes, ‘in day-to-day life, I worship Earth as God—representing everything—and Nature as its spirit.’ Overlooking Walker’s paganism expressed in her fiction and nonfiction work exposes a significant gap in the discipline of womanist theological scholarship because of the important task of uncovering black women’s voices, including Walker’s.¹²³

One of the primary goals outlined in Marcia Riggs’ *Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* is “uncovering the roots of a womanist tradition through examination and reintegration of black women’s experience into black history in particular and American history in general.”¹²⁴ Riggs suggests that, “studying the lives and ethical thought of historical and present-day black women is crucial for womanist scholarship.”¹²⁵

Harris’ new hermeneutic, womanist humanism, is designed to move womanist theology into position to accept the challenge of religious plurality.¹²⁶ She asks these questions:

¹²¹ Melanie L. Harris, “Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 211.

¹²² Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 211.

¹²³ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 211.

¹²⁴ Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 2.

¹²⁵ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 223.

¹²⁶ Harris, “Womanist Humanist,” 212.

Why hasn't womanist theology and ethics taken Walker's pagan identity seriously? Is it because, until recently, womanist theology has been identified as solely Christian and limited to using methodologies that assume Christian presuppositions and associate with Christian categories? Do those categories limit womanist theology's ability to reach and liberate black women who have religious experiences outside of Christian traditions? As the debate ensues about nature and future directions of womanist theology, new methodologies are being developed to address these and other critiques.¹²⁷

It is here that we find Harris giving womanist humanism as a response to the assumed Christian presuppositions of womanist theology. She challenges womanist theology to "mature beyond comfortable settings of Christian categories and perspectives, womanist theology is now at a point whereby its voice must speak for the liberation and religious expressions of black women in a variety of religious traditions."¹²⁸ Harris goes on to say,

No longer does the Christian church or academic settings house enough space to embody where womanist theology must go. If we are to engage all of black women's religious experiences, womanist theology must break outside of its own western, Christian categories, be self-critical, and begin to embrace religious plurality.¹²⁹

Harris is setting the stage to introduce her concept of womanist humanism through the lens of Black humanism. It is her response to the lack of plurality in womanist discourse. She posits that womanism is now old enough to withstand such critique. Black humanism, she states, "is one of these schools of thought that contributes to and is mutually enhanced by a womanist perspective. Its sharp critique of Christianity informs womanist theology on how to move beyond Christian presuppositions and be more inclusive of other black women's non-Christian stance."¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Harris, "Womanist Humanism," 212.

¹²⁸ Harris, "Womanist Humanism," 221.

¹²⁹ Harris, "Womanist Humanism," 221.

¹³⁰ Harris, "Womanist Humanism," 221–22.

In her proposed new hermeneutic she names the joining of Black humanism and womanist methodology to engage this “nitty-gritty hermeneutic.”¹³¹

The new hermeneutic is mutually enhancing to both schools of thought and helps to provide critique that will enrich the future direction of both womanism and black humanism. Womanist humanism can be described as the personification of a combined womanist attitude of “wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one”¹³² and the black humanist characteristic of ‘heuristic rebelliousness.’ As such, it takes seriously hard theological critique of Christianity and forms a critical, descriptive, and prescriptive approach to black religion.¹³³

Harris acknowledges that “theological critique of Christianity limits the scope of black humanism.”¹³⁴ One of those critiques is that though womanist humanism is reactionary, it is necessary for critiquing Christian presuppositions as it deconstructs “the way black religion has been constructed.”¹³⁵ She also points to the way in which womanist humanism problematizes and critiques Christianity in order to open the scope of both womanist discourse and black religion.¹³⁶ As black women’s stories have always been needed in scholarship, “womanist humanism takes into account the complexity of black women’s experience of interrelated oppressions including (but not excluding) racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism”¹³⁷ while also considering “how this analysis can be interpreted theologically and ethically while embracing the depths of religious plurality.”¹³⁸ It is clear that Harris believes womanist humanism to be the perfect embodiment of

¹³¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 117.

¹³² Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, xi.

¹³³ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 222.

¹³⁴ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 225.

¹³⁵ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 225.

¹³⁶ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 225.

¹³⁷ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 222.

¹³⁸ Harris, “Womanist Humanism,” 222.

Walker's paganism, that it embraces and values the experiences of black women, and that it furthers the progress of black religious discourse.

Classical Practical Theologians

The rich ground and fruitful seeds of practical theology that inform this dissertation have been planted by Dennis Ackerman, Riet Bons-Storm, Don Browning, Craig Dykstra, Edward Farley, Duncan Forrester, Wilhelm Gräb, Daniel Loüw, Norbert Mette, Mary Elizabeth Moore, Lewis Mudge, Jean-Guy Nadeau, Stephen Pattison, Hendrick Pieterse, James Poling, Hans van der Ven, and Marcel Viau.¹³⁹ It is these forerunners and their influences that have provided a path for more contemporary practical theology scholars to offer a fresh and expansive study and practice of the field.

Among the classical practical theologians, the field has been particularly profoundly shaped by Richard R. Osmer's, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Osmer defines and explain the four core tasks of practical theology as: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative task, pragmatic. In the first task, *descriptive-empirical*, the inquiry asks, "What's going on?" Osmer believes this is best served by attentive listening, coupled with meaningful presence to attend and guide folks on their spiritual path—a priestly listening.¹⁴⁰

The *interpretive* task asks, "Why is this going on?" This, properly explicated, leads to a sagely wisdom, which for Osmer is a thoughtful and theoretical interpretation. Here, Osmer draws upon the Wisdom tradition of the Christian biblical canon to support his claims.¹⁴¹ Next,

¹³⁹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "The Contributions of Practical Theology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 31–78.

¹⁴¹ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 79–128.

the *normative* task asks, “What ought to be going on?” Osmer likens this to a prophetic discernment, an ability to sympathize while using a theological and ethical interpretation to proclaim transformative words to establish a transforming practice.¹⁴² It is here that Osmer points to Elaine Graham’s *Transformative Practice* as an approach to normativity. Graham has three central arguments for foundational transforming practice, which she posits as the praxis of freedom and love. For Graham, such transforming practice “generates new knowledge and values that cannot be formed any other way; (is) oriented to human freedom and love and struggles to overcome structures of domination, including the oppression of women; (and) discloses God and offers a model of transcendence.”¹⁴³ Osmer concludes with the *pragmatic task* which asks, “How might we respond?” Here one determines strategies of action by entering into reflective conversations.¹⁴⁴

Osmer argues that practical theologians most often focus on issues of common good and a lack of robust practical theology for the church. For this reason, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* seeks to turn the enterprise of practical theology toward the church. However, Osmer, drawing directly from Hans-Georg Gadamer, describes interpretive activity along the lines of a hermetical circle that consists of the following five moments: “preunderstanding; the experience of being brought up short; dialogical interplay; fusion of horizons; and application.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 129–73.

¹⁴³ Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996).

¹⁴⁴ Osmer, *Practical Theology* 175–218.

¹⁴⁵ Osmer, *Practical Theology* 23.

Osmer's hermeneutical gleanings most closely relate to the method I employ in this dissertation.

For Bonnie Miller-McLemore, practical theology as a term refers to at least four distinct enterprises with different audiences and objectives: "it is a *discipline* among scholars...an *activity of faith* among believers...it is a *method* for studying theology in practices...and it is a *curricular area* of subdisciplines in the seminary."¹⁴⁶ Miller-McLemore concludes,

Each understanding points to different spatial locations, from *daily life* to *library* and *fieldwork* to *classroom*, *congregations*, and *community*...and to *academic guild* and *global* context. The four understandings are connected and interdependent, not mutually exclusive, however, and reflect the range and complexity of practical theology today.¹⁴⁷

Practical theology "redefines what constitutes theological knowledge or wisdom and seeks a theology for the masses"¹⁴⁸ by exploring the cacophony of lived realities and beliefs. It is through the "testing of the practical veracity"¹⁴⁹ that we "interpret situations,"¹⁵⁰ or make use of "descriptive theology."¹⁵¹ As such, it has a "steadfast interest in concepts that overstep any one discipline, such as *integration* in theological education, *formation* and discipleship in religious communities, and *vocation* in the professions and over a lifetime."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶ Miller-McLemore, "The Contributions of Practical Theology," 5.

¹⁴⁷ Miller-McLemore, "The Contributions of Practical Theology," 5.

¹⁴⁸ Miller-McLemore, "The Contributions of Practical Theology," 17.

¹⁴⁹ Karl Rahner, "Practical Theology within the Totality of Theological Disciplines," trans. Graham Harrison, *Theological Investigations* 9 (1972): 101–114.

¹⁵⁰ Edward Farley, "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry in the Nature of Practical Theology," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 1–26.

¹⁵¹ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 6.

¹⁵² Miller-McLemore, "The Contributions of Practical Theology," 17.

Practical theology's academic importance rests on its value for—its relationship to—the life of everyday faith.¹⁵³ In this way practical theology is a generalized way of doing theology, “concerned with the embodiment of religious beliefs in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities. It engages personal, ecclesial, and social experience to discern the meaning of divine presence and to enable faith human response.”¹⁵⁴

For R. Ruard Ganzevoort, practical theology as lived religion can be understood as a “tracing the sacred.”¹⁵⁵ He uses a variety of definitions of the word tracing to explain, beginning with tracing as *traveling*, that is to say that “when we do theology, we travel the realm of the sacred, trying to understand what is happening there, and letting ourselves be affected by what and whom we encounter.”¹⁵⁶ Another definition of tracing is *following* for which Ganzevoort posits that it is this sense of tracing that we are “following the way of God.”¹⁵⁷ He defines *studying* as a form of tracing because of its “ability to discern and analyze evidence or remains of the sacred,”¹⁵⁸ and its meaningfulness to the lived experience. Ganzevoort concludes the definition by proposing *sketching* as a form of tracing with a goal of “trying not to copy the religious reality and experience, but to model or even decorate it by envisioning and developing a world in which we can live faithfully.”¹⁵⁹ Ganzevoort uniquely echoes Osmer's four core tasks

¹⁵³ Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 9.

¹⁵⁴ Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 14.

¹⁵⁵ R Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road When Tracing the Sacred Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion,” *ResearchGate*, 2009, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road,” 7.

¹⁵⁷ Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road,” 7.

¹⁵⁸ Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road,” 7.

¹⁵⁹ Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road,” 7.

of practical theology: “descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic.”¹⁶⁰ Both scholars seek to answer: “‘What’s going on?’ ‘Why is this going on?’ ‘What ought to be going on?’ and ‘How might we respond?’”¹⁶¹

Yet, while Ganzevoort names the common understandings of practical theology, joining with classical practical theologian Osmer, he also casts his critical gaze toward practical theology about which he asks the following questions,

First...whether practical theology should limit itself to: Christian phenomena and interpretations or take a principled broader view of religion and world views; second...how praxis and theology are connected...third, whether the researcher is expected to be believer, a practitioner or a distantiated observer...fourth...whether we develop our discourse for church, society, or academia.¹⁶²

For the purposes of this dissertation, I consider Ganzevoort’s third and fourth fork in the road: the researcher and the audience. Interestingly, he uses an analogy from sports to gauge whether the theologian is expected to be a participant in the field of study or whether she is the investigator. For this, Ganzevoort suggest “four roles of the researcher: the player, the coach, the referee, and the commentator.”¹⁶³ In this dissertation, as the researcher I will embody each of the four roles and look to Ganzevoort’s theological perspectives and connections to sports. For this reason, I highlight his perspectives on player, coach, referee, and commentator.

Ganzevoort has this to say about the researcher as the player:

This is the person who actually engages in the game as a firsthand participant...This includes not only the trained theologian, but every believer...there is a lot to be said for the preference of this perspective, because this is as close as we can get at the actual relationship with the sacred. To speak of God (theo-logy) in praxis is best found in the

¹⁶⁰ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

¹⁶¹ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

¹⁶² Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road,” 8.

¹⁶³ Ganzevoort, “Forks in the Road,” 12–13.

lives of those that actually play the game...The praxis here is the praxis of faith and there is no aim beyond a more profound and salutary praxis of faith itself. Practical theology then is a spiritual discipline.¹⁶⁴

The researcher as a sports coach, according to Ganzevoort is,

the person who is dedicated to enabling others to engage in the game. The coach is committed to a particular team...enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and (...) exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God.¹⁶⁵ In this role, the practical theologian is called to contribute to the praxis of faith through the praxis of the practitioner. Practical theology here is a transformative discipline.¹⁶⁶

In terms of the referee's role in practical theology, Ganzevoort makes important connections in this way:

This is the person that follows the game intently, only to interfere when the rules are being broken or participants hurt one another. Here the engagement of the practical theologian is a critical one. The praxis of faith is accepted as the playing field, but that doesn't mean that anything goes. Ethical, doctrinal, psychological, and other criteria are brought to the task of protecting the game from unfair tricks, power play, and perversions. Practical theology here is a critical discipline, based on a constant interaction between the complex and pluralistic praxis of faith, the religious traditions, and academic reflection.¹⁶⁷

The practical theologian, according to Ganzevoort, can also be said to be a commentator. This person

is the journalist who usually enjoys the game a great deal...but accepts the task of clarifying what happens in the playing field. The commentator tries to analyze the movements and interpret the strategies...In religion, this is often the position of academic theology. The practical theologian as commentator seeks to recognize religious forms, describe them properly, interpret them in their relation to old and new religious traditions, and suggest adequate strategies for their development, but without interfering too much with the game itself.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road," 12.

¹⁶⁵ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Kindle (London: SCM Press, 2006), 4.

¹⁶⁶ Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road," 12.

¹⁶⁷ Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road," 12.

¹⁶⁸ Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road," 12.

Practical theologian Jaco Hamman enters the court with his view on play as it pertains to the lived experience. He asserts, “play is a persistent and quintessential human activity and a transformational experience that always seem to find some expression. This reality invites practical theological reflection.”¹⁶⁹ Hamman argues that “Play also fosters and enriches faith, deepens hope and can help us to love our neighbors and ourselves by minimizing conflict and opening new possibilities for being in relationship.”¹⁷⁰ He understands playing as embodied theology and as such can develop and inform life and faith.¹⁷¹ For Hamman, the question at the heart of practical theological reflection and play is: “How does one bring a telic activity such as practical theological reflection to an autotelic practice such as play without removing the essence of the latter?”¹⁷² Play is a “powerful transformative force poorly understood and even mistrusted, especially by Christian tradition.”¹⁷³ It is understood then, that play embodies faith. For this reason, practical theology “is obligated to explore playing’s role in personal, familial, and congregational life and cannot ignore this core aspect of human life.”¹⁷⁴ Hamman adds, “playing can inform the ways we engage in practical theological reflection.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ Jaco Hamman, “Playing,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014), 42.

¹⁷⁰ Hamman, “Playing,” 42.

¹⁷¹ Hamman, “Playing,” 43.

¹⁷² Hamman, “Playing,” 44.

¹⁷³ Hamman, “Playing,” 44.

¹⁷⁴ Hamman, “Playing,” 44.

¹⁷⁵ Hamman, “Playing,” 45.

Hamman points toward David Miller's *Gods and Games; Toward a Theology of Play* that highlighted play not only as a dimension of knowing, but also as a way of living. He also points toward psychiatrist Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play and author of *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, Invigorates the Soul*, who writes, "the very primal," "pre-conscious and preverbal" activity of play resists defining and is best described by naming its qualities: "Apparent purposelessness; Voluntary; Inherent attraction; Freedom from time; Diminished consciousness of self; improvisational potential; and Continuations desire."¹⁷⁶ For Brown, play is a state of mind rather than an activity. In further seeking to root playing as embodied theology, Hamman turns to pastoral theologian Michael Koppel who identifies play as "structural chaos." More specifically, Koppel describes play as embodied theology because it:

1. Demonstrates cooperative engagement within the self and between self and others that heightens enjoyment of God and pulls us deeply into life experiences;
2. Incorporates the new and innovative within already structured patterns of behavior;
3. Allows for making mistakes as we develop creative, and sometimes previously unimagined, pastoral practices.¹⁷⁷

Hamman considers helpful systematic theologian James H. Evans' definition of play as "a set of activities or practices that occurs in the interstices between freedom and structure, between subject(ive) and object(ive), between creation and imitation."¹⁷⁸ Evans draws on African American experience of chattel slavery to argue that the play of God, and playing with God, in dark places and times, fosters endurance and brings hope.

¹⁷⁶ Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughn, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Avery, 2009), 17.

¹⁷⁷ Michael S. Koppel, *Open-Hearted Ministry: Play as Key to Pastoral Leadership* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 14.

¹⁷⁸ James H. Evans, *Playing* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 11.

Hamman believes Jesus is a political, cultural, and religious player and looks to Evans to solidify this. “In the cross,” Evans writes, “we see the ultimate example of rough play.”¹⁷⁹ Hamman observes that Evans shows how the Spirit is acting in and creating a playing field. The “liminality within playing, the fact that political, economic, and social boundaries are blurred and obliterated through play, creates the possibility for a new reality....The ability to play with others fosters trust, belonging, and cooperation and allows for the exploration of difference, dynamics that are foundational to Christian practices such as hospitality and stewardship.”¹⁸⁰

Queer and Queering

Jeanne Hoefft’s “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism” highlights the significance of engaging queer theory in practical theology. She notes, “just as feminists were criticized for generalizing from a white and straight standpoint, so also can gay rights theorists and activists be critiqued for taking the gay white male perspective and failing to attend to gender and race.”¹⁸¹ She continues, “issues of essentialism and social construction arise in thinking about lesbian and gay identity as much as they do in thinking about gender but with some important twists.”¹⁸² For her, “practical theologians have just begun to consider the deeper heteronormativity in discussions of sexuality and gender,”¹⁸³ which leads us to queer theory in practical theology. Says Hoefft,

Queer theory emerges from gay and lesbian theologies but goes on to question prevailing understandings of sex and gender difference. This leads them to suggest that we should not consider sex or gender deviance as a defect but rather as one more way God creates

¹⁷⁹ Evans, *Playing*, 64.

¹⁸⁰ Hamman, “Playing,” 46.

¹⁸¹ Hoefft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 417.

¹⁸² Hoefft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 417.

¹⁸³ Hoefft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 418.

diversity in human life. The biological is not a static aspect of human life but is diverse and dynamic. Queer theorists also draw on poststructuralism to think about the fragmentation or multiplicity of sex/gender identity and challenge the notion of stable unified sexual or gendered identities.¹⁸⁴

Hoeft continues the conversation about queer theory in practical theology when she states, “Practical theology attends to integration of thought and practice in concrete lived experience. It works at the intersection of culture, church, and academy and between theology and other university disciplines to bring the best in one area to another for critical conversation.”¹⁸⁵ As such, “queer theologians ask in what ways conceptions of God, Christ, and church also function to support a heterosexual ideology.”¹⁸⁶

Queer theorists argue that “the sex binary of male and female is not inherently given but is instead a social construction to support heterosexual hegemony. Male and female are thus politically assigned categories of identity.”¹⁸⁷ Insofar as “queer theology is interested in ‘queering’ God, Christ, and church by multiplying diversity, disrupting the status quo, and crossing firmly policed borders,”¹⁸⁸ there must be room for those of us who hold the many intersections of a queer life—particularly those of us who have been formed in the Black church tradition, among others. As practical theology is interested in the intersections of gender, sexism, and heterosexism, along with how theology functions in people’s lives, answers need to be given to questions such as, “How do people who live at the borders of male/female experience God?

¹⁸⁴ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 418.

¹⁸⁵ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

¹⁸⁶ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

¹⁸⁷ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

¹⁸⁸ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

Does a queer God function for a more or less abundant life?”¹⁸⁹ “[P]ractical theologians must take up these questions and seek answers that account for the real people who struggle to find an authentic and meaningful life on the boundaries of church and society.”¹⁹⁰ Hoeft notes that there have been few contextual and practical theologians to take up the mantle of queer like Marcella Althaus-Reid. She states that although “practical theologians have published texts arguing for LGBT inclusion and have begun to address topics related to LGBT concerns, there have been almost no queer identified texts from a practical or contextual theological perspective besides Althaus-Reid’s.”¹⁹¹

As a contextual theologian, Althaus-Reid describes an “indecent theology of a queer God who is a stranger at the gate; a God that has been excluded by sexual and economic normativities but also by sexual epistemological conventions.”¹⁹² In her book *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, Althaus-Reid writes, “out-of-the-closet theologians do not leave the personal aside, and that always implies a risk, but neither do the closeted kind.”¹⁹³ Queer practical theologians take that risk when they enter the conversation and engage in scholarship. Thus, the gendered pronouns in Hoeft’s book are all female in resistance to the patriarchal history of Christianity, though they could be used interchangeably with male. Thus Bi/Christ, Sophia/Christ whose sexual boundaries are fluid, Sophia/Christ whose ‘male’ flesh

¹⁸⁹ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

¹⁹⁰ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

¹⁹¹ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

¹⁹² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 9.

¹⁹³ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 88.

embodies the woman-spirit of Sophia/Wisdom, and Sophia/Christ who defies being defined by any either/or, by either agape or eros love alone.¹⁹⁴

One example of this kind of freedom from the strictures of dualism can be found in Althaus-Reid's challenging the traditional heterosexual interpretation of Jesus with the idea of a Bi/Christ:

The question of a Bi/Christ is related not to the sexual performances of Jesus, which we ignore. As far as we are concerned, Jesus may have been a transvestite, a butch lesbian, a gay or a heterosexual person. Heterosexual patterns of thought prevail in the narratives, and this is easy to identify not by the 'girl meets boy' model (or girl meets God), but by the patterns of hierarchical, binary constructive organized thought. The Systematic Messiah is a Christ of clear limits and boundaries, a compromise found amongst the ambiguities of his character and the almost military precision and clear planning of his life which heterosexual thought requires.¹⁹⁵

Indecent Theology is inherently made up of contradictions and regressions, for it struggles against the binary discourses proclaimed by systematic theology and adopted by the church.¹⁹⁶

The primary contradiction, of course, is Queer Theology's blurring of the line between sexuality and theology. This blurred line is not one that Queer theologians create, but that Queer theologians acknowledge, accept, and embrace without resistance, denial, or demonization of the sexual.

What Queer or Indecent Theology does, according to Althaus-Reid, is "disrobe the underwear of heterosexual theology."¹⁹⁷ Althaus-Reid refers to this as "a kind of coming-out process in which we are no longer [hetero]sexually neutral theologians."¹⁹⁸ Sex and sexuality re-

¹⁹⁴ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 120.

¹⁹⁵ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 114.

¹⁹⁶ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 20.

¹⁹⁷ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 19.

¹⁹⁸ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 19.

enter the realm of the holy and pure—categories and distinctions that cease to exist when their boundaries are smudged and blurred both by a God and a people of faith who embody and embrace sexuality and sexual experience. In a dualistic church influenced by and participating in heterosexist culture where the burden is on Queer people to “come out” to society as “other,” it is no surprise that the church deems this “other” deviant. In an either/or understanding of sexuality and spirituality, you are either heterosexual/pure or non-heterosexual/impure. In light of the fact that the church has historically been compelled to temper and control even the supposed purity of heterosexuality, how much more must the church control and protect itself from what it determines sexual deviation?

Althaus-Reid describes her book *The Queer God* as rediscovering “God outside of heterosexual ideology which has been prevalent in the history of Christianity and theology.”¹⁹⁹ She argues that God is queer with her alternative to traditional Christian theology in “a process of theological queering.”²⁰⁰ She continues, “by theological queering, we mean the deliberate questioning of heterosexual experience and thinking which has shaped our understanding of theology, the role of the theologian and hermeneutics.”²⁰¹ Althaus-Reid believes, “by disrupting the sexual ideology of Christianity, a whole political project which works against people’s lives is also disrupted,”²⁰² in which theology is a sexual act.²⁰³ She invites us to face the ways in which traditional Christian practices are sexual in nature. As such those practices have been

¹⁹⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 2.

²⁰⁰ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 2.

²⁰¹ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 2.

²⁰² Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 9.

²⁰³ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 11.

abused by those within these institutions to maintain the status quo, keeping queer people at the margins. Speaking of the queer theologian, she says, “the Queer theologian who keeps involved in the hard problematizing of her role and vocation finds [that] the way forward lies in her commitment to pervert Christian theology, by the disrobing of what underwear is left in the standing of the theologian.”²⁰⁴ For Althaus-Reid, the role of the queer theologian is thus to problematize the system and to foster and embrace a new way of doing theology and experiencing God.

To *do* theology that is centered in my embodiment as a black, queer, celebrated athlete, coach, ordained clergy woman that engages religious beliefs through personal, ecclesial, and social experiences to discern the meaning of divine presence and to enable a faithful human response, is to respond to the call from Miller-McLemore for “a more diverse representation of voices and a wider audience;”²⁰⁵ to add to the “developments in the next several decades [that] challenge [a] Western ordering and offer fresh approaches to study and practice of practical theology.”²⁰⁶ More specifically it is to join my voice and scholarship to the “minority scholars who have made major strides, creating a place where there was previously no place for new ideas and voices.”²⁰⁷ To this end, I look to spiritual formation practical theologians, Evelyn Parker, Anne Streaty Wimberly, and David Perrin for scholarship and voice through which to launch.

Spiritual Formation Practical Theologians

²⁰⁴ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 15.

²⁰⁵ Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 15.

²⁰⁶ Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 15.

²⁰⁷ Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 15.

In her *Womanist Theory* essay, Parker understands and uses womanist practical theological method focused on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ecological justice as intersecting analytical tools.²⁰⁸ Within this method the lived experiences of women and girls are prioritized and valued. Parker notes, “although the corpus of womanist practical theology is small, a survey of research and methods on the black female body in practical theology has implications for future scholarship.”²⁰⁹ In her edited work with Anne Streaty Wimberly, *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*, Parker calls for a liberation agenda within the Black church.²¹⁰ Together they ask: “[H]ave we as a people, in fact, substituted words for wisdom that now confuse our understanding of it?”²¹¹ The written accounts of cultural wisdom are found in “personal testimonies about treacherous journeys of survival, and the attitudes, values and profound insights about life’s journey.”²¹² And so historically it is personal testimonies, “wisdom guides and sayings from these accounts [that] have been an integral part of the daily lives of black Christians.”²¹³ Parker and Wimberly also state, “in the midst of life’s ambiguities the fervent quest of black Christians is for wisdom necessary for choosing and acting in ways that produce wholeness.”²¹⁴

²⁰⁸ Evelyn L. Parker, “Womanist Theory,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014), 204.

²⁰⁹ Parker, “Womanist Theory,” 204.

²¹⁰ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, “In Search of Wisdom: Necessity and Challenge,” in *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*, ed. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 9–10.

²¹¹ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, “In Search of Wisdom,” 10.

²¹² Streaty Wimberly and Parker, “In Search of Wisdom,” 11.

²¹³ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, “In Search of Wisdom,” 11.

²¹⁴ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, “In Search of Wisdom,” 12.

Wimberly and Parker pose the question, “How do we form this wisdom? What is the responsibility of black churches in guiding black people’s wisdom formation?”²¹⁵ They answer the questions with an outline of wisdom formation: The Nature of Wisdom Formation; Stories of Wisdom Formation, God’s Revelation and the Counsel of Others; Facing Challenges to Wisdom Formation in the Information Age; Wisdom Formation in Lifelong Perspective; Wisdom Formation as Gift Sharing in Black Churches; and The Necessity of Shared Gifts in the Black Church.²¹⁶ Within each of these movements God is the source. For these authors, it is through the Black church that formation and transformation occur. Parker and Wimberly state, “through involvement in spiritual disciplines, we enter into a process of developing [a] spirituality of wisdom.”²¹⁷ As we form wisdom, we “come to an honest awareness that there are some dilemmas in life for which no easy resolution will come.”²¹⁸

They believe wisdom is attained by and through our openness and engagement in life itself. They suggest that “to the extent that we are ready to gain wisdom, life’s experiences will offer it to us to ‘catch’ in the form of what some call ‘mother wit,’ or our intuitive ‘knowing.’”²¹⁹ Such wisdom formation is a lifelong process that is intentional and received through the “values of others, remembering what we receive, discerning the salience of what we receive, and deciding whether or how best to act on it.”²²⁰ The crux of their scholarship, for the purposes of

²¹⁵ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, "In Search of Wisdom," 12.

²¹⁶ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, "In Search of Wisdom," 12–20.

²¹⁷ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, "In Search of Wisdom," 13.

²¹⁸ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, "In Search of Wisdom," 13.

²¹⁹ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, "In Search of Wisdom," 14.

²²⁰ Streaty Wimberly and Parker, "In Search of Wisdom," 15.

my research, is the overwhelming attention they give to the Black church. Wimberly and Parker situate their scholarship within the Black church, noting their belief that “our churches are essential faith ‘villages’ that generate this wisdom formation through giving gifts of time, information, insights, encouragement, and praise.”²²¹ This is an old paradigm.

Wimberly in *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* queries “how our stories connect with God’s story in ways that give liberating wisdom and hope-building vocation along life’s sojourn if we do not share them, look at them critically, and discern responsible choices.”²²² Throughout the book she seeks to answer the question, “What may individuals and families learn from sharing stories both of struggle and promise?”²²³ She, like Parker, addresses the complexity of the problem through the model of the black church. To do so, she uses “story-linking,” which she defines as follows:

A process whereby Christian education participants connect components of their everyday life stories with the Christian faith story found in Scripture. They also connect their stories with Christian faith heritage stories of African American exemplars, past and present...the purpose of this linkage is to help persons be aware of the liberating activity of God and God’s call to vocation—living in the image of Jesus Christ—in both biblical and present times.²²⁴

In her story-linking process, Wimberly outlines six interrelated factors that give rise to our stories (lived experience): “Identity, Social Contexts, Interpersonal Relationships, Life Events, Life Meanings, and Our Unfolding Story Plot.”²²⁵ Within the factor ‘identity,’ Wimberly asks the

²²¹ Charles F. Melchert, *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 138.

²²² Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), xi.

²²³ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, xi.

²²⁴ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, xi.

²²⁵ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 27–36.

question, “Who Am I?”²²⁶ This is phase one of four. She believes we answer this question by “examining the formation of our identities in the world we live in, including our families, communities, and larger society.”²²⁷ Our social contexts are “informed by the availability or nonavailability of needed resources,”²²⁸ and thus, “Our stories are shaped by the social contexts in which we live and engage in the affairs of life.”²²⁹ In interpersonal relationships, “Our stories are shaped by our past and present relationships with persons.”²³⁰

Wimberly notes that “our stories are informed by life events taking place in our social contexts and emerging out of our relationships that remain vivid in our memories. Life events are positive and negative events that happen to us over the course of our lives.”²³¹ She defines life meanings as stories informed by the meanings we assign to our lives. She continues

Our meaning-making is...our way of making sense out of our lives through judgments we make about every aspect of our lives. It includes positive and negative thoughts and feelings about our value and dignity as human beings...what we consider to be the purpose of our lives and what we think and feel about that purpose.²³²

Lastly, according to Wimberly, our unfolding story plot manifests as “we approach life and act on life according to the meaning we assign to all of the components to our lives...how we choose to act contributes to how ever part of our lives unfolds.”²³³ Phase two calls for “engaging the

²²⁶ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 27.

²²⁷ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 38.

²²⁸ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 28.

²²⁹ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 28.

²³⁰ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 28.

²³¹ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 28.

²³² Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 28.

²³³ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 28–29.

Christian faith story in the bible.”²³⁴ Wimberly describes focusing on the story or text as being like a mirror whereby one enters into a partnership with the characters and thus envisions God’s action and considers how we participate with God.²³⁵

In phase three Wimberly suggests “engaging Christian faith stories from the African American heritage”²³⁶ as a means to express our stories. She says: “it is important to be aware that stories may be told in a variety of ways through a variety of approaches. This means that we should not be hesitant in seeking and using stories, music, sermons, poems, prayers, and artwork to give voice to the African American Christian faith heritage.”²³⁷

Her fourth and final phase calls for “engaging in Christian ethical decision making,”²³⁸ in which “persons bring to bear on their life story ideas, wise insights, and discernment from the first three phases of the story-linking process.”²³⁹

Wimberly proposes that one way of determining what Bible stories/tests to use for story-linking in African American settings is to look for stories/texts already chosen by African Americans across the years. She believes this is best accomplished by looking for Scriptural references in African American cultural expressions such as spirituals, hymns, gospel songs, sermons, poems and folk sayings.²⁴⁰ She notes that, dating back to slavery, “African Americans

²³⁴ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 30.

²³⁵ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 31.

²³⁶ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 31.

²³⁷ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 32.

²³⁸ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 33.

²³⁹ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 33.

²⁴⁰ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 108.

have had a strong biblical orientation and have relied on specific stories/texts for help in the throes of trials and tribulations.”²⁴¹ According to Wimberly, when we select “Bible stories/texts or contemporary story-linking processes from the wealth of cultural choices, we are making *historical-cultural choices* of Scripture.”²⁴²

Catholic priest and religious scholar David Perrin’s *Studying Christian Spirituality* is another vital text for my dissertation. This work reshapes classical approaches to Christian spirituality that are more focused on theology and the history of Christian spirituality, while honoring the significant contributions of both.²⁴³ In nine chapters, Perrin plunges deeply into questions to make the case for a strengthened link between spirituality and disciplines in the human sciences such as philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and anthropology. Perrin addresses questions of context: God, Christian anthropology, history, text, human-spiritual development, and spiritual practice. He also names critical edges, among them science, feminism, gender, cyberspace, work, and leadership.²⁴⁴

In each of his chapters, he synthesizes and highlights critical issues to which Christian spirituality must attend. Perrin’s answers to the question of what it means to think critically in Christian spirituality today inform his core methodical principles: broad understanding of spirituality; relationship between Christian spirituality and theology; experience as the object of

²⁴¹ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 108.

²⁴² Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 108.

²⁴³ David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 1.

²⁴⁴ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, v–viii.

study; the importance of context; historical consciousness; a multidisciplinary approach; and a hermeneutical approach.²⁴⁵

I elaborate on his core methodological principals in Chapter Three. For now it is enough to note that Perrin observes that,

All spirituality is particular. It takes place in a particular context, in a particular location (including its own geography and climate), a particular historical setting (including its political, economic, and social elements), and a particular culture (including its language, symbols, myths, and values. These factors influence and shape the development of spiritualities alongside the dynamics of faith.²⁴⁶

Perrin makes an important distinction between spirituality and religion, noting that “religions tend to be identified with authoritative spiritual traditions and structures that include...clear beliefs, practices, symbols, and texts. All of these aspects are identified with the framework that contains the boundaries of the particular religious traditions.”²⁴⁷

He goes on to say, “while religions tend to give clear directions in life, conversely many spiritualities are considered more fluid with commitment to diversity and the unexpected. It could be said [that] spiritualities are comfortable encountering God in the flux and flow of life.”²⁴⁸ David Tracey echoes this when he writes:

It is enough for spirituality to realize that there is mystery and presence in the ordinary world. The world itself is revelatory of God’s presence, so the intense rituals, liturgies, and chants become less important in developing and maintaining a compelling sense of the sacred. Reality does not have to be broken by ritual to reveal the sacred, and time does not have to be suspended to admit the eternal...God reveals itself to us not only in scripture, creation, and tradition (the three official sources of revelation), but also in the minor revelations of everyday life.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 11–13.

²⁴⁶ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 58.

²⁴⁷ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 44.

²⁴⁸ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 45.

²⁴⁹ David Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 164.

And so “spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”²⁵⁰ Perrin

sums up Christian spirituality as

the experience of transformation in the Divine-human relationship as modeled by Jesus Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality is appropriated as a lifestyle within all relationships in the broader Christian community as well as in society in general. While Christian spirituality embraces Christian traditions and beliefs, it also exceeds the boundaries of established religions and their theologies. As such Christian spirituality is always open to new and unexpected expressions of the way the Spirit of God is actively incarnated in human history, whether within the Christian traditions or from outside them.²⁵¹

Entering the conversation, Sandra Schneiders observes that Christian spirituality as a lived experience has the “capacity to be outside or even ahead of theological developments and introduce...insights and convictions which stretch the received theological categories and paradigms.”²⁵²

As experience is a valid location of study, it is imperative we ask the following questions: “*What* did you experience? What does it *mean* for you? What, specifically, did you *learn* from this experience? And: What *insights* did you have about *yourself* as a result of this experience?”²⁵³ Perrin suggests, “for experience to be credible and meaningful it must include thoughtful analysis; probing questions; interpretation; conscious reflection on personal biases,

²⁵⁰ Sandra Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods, and Types,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

²⁵¹ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 32.

²⁵² Sandra M. Schneiders, “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 9–14.

²⁵³ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 48.

emotions and feelings; and in dialogue with others along with openness to critical feedback.”²⁵⁴

Perrin articulates four approaches to studying Christian spirituality: Theological, historical, anthropological, and hermeneutical. He understands Christian spirituality and theology as separate yet related areas of reflection. Perrin posits two ways for theology to be used in Christian spirituality: in a doctrinal approach and an interdisciplinary approach.²⁵⁵ As such, experience doesn’t speak for itself and therefore there must be a hermeneutical task to give it shape. Perrin says, “to have had the experience, people need to be able to describe the events in language, critically reflect on them, interpret them, and probe for new meaning. In so doing....be open to new ways the Spirit of God is active in the world.”²⁵⁶ This runs counter to a dogmatic approach that leads to the way one would “expect” something to be seen or experienced; by contrast, “being open to other possibilities allows people to probe their experience.”²⁵⁷

While doctrinal theology seeks to critically analyze what can be believed about God and God’s presence in the world by a stable body of beliefs, “it sees theology as the theory of Christian life, and spirituality as the application of these doctrines to the practice of Christian life.”²⁵⁸ Christian spirituality does not seek to deduce from what is already known about God and Christian living. It aims to “understand spirituality as it transforms the human subject in Christ and the Holy Spirit.”²⁵⁹ Perrin suggest that “Christian spirituality is about the nature of a network

²⁵⁴ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 48.

²⁵⁵ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 48.

²⁵⁶ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 49.

²⁵⁷ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 50.

²⁵⁸ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 36.

²⁵⁹ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 37.

of relationships: how they are concretely lived, bring about human growth, and transform people in the Spirit of God.”²⁶⁰ And so experience means people trusting “their hunches, [and] engag[ing] their intuition and imagination to allow for an active involvement of God in the world to shine forth in new and unexpected ways.”²⁶¹

This process, according to Perrin, opens the way for being in relationship with oneself, the world, and God in new ways that can lead, among many things, to changes in personal beliefs, which in turn lead to spiritual development that fosters wisdom, depth of character, and an appreciation of the relative nature of one’s life in the world before God and others.²⁶² Perrin calls for a “mindful awareness of one’s own experience”²⁶³ that requires “extensive work and without critical inquiry, experience can be empty and void, hence thoughtful, rigorous reflection of life events, personally and collectively, of the past, gives experiences an authenticity for grounds of study and transformation.”²⁶⁴

It is within these experiences that we engage the text. For Perrin, texts in Christian spirituality refers not to playbooks or instructional manuals, but rather to “texts that use metaphor, figures of speech, parables, poetry, and other imaginative literary devices to convey meanings and truths about life, about people, and about God, but these truths are not immediately available.”²⁶⁵ We use the hermeneutical theory to tease out meanings and messages given in texts

²⁶⁰ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 37.

²⁶¹ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 50.

²⁶² Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 50.

²⁶³ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 49.

²⁶⁴ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 49.

²⁶⁵ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 192.

by asking, “what the text says about life, about spirituality, about something.”²⁶⁶ From there we understand the text has something to say and that the task is in interpreting texts to make the transition from the life-world of the text to our own life-world.²⁶⁷ Perrin notes, however, it is important to properly hold in tension the objective and the subjective nature of the text so that we may remain more open to new ways God speaks and to renew our ways within a changing and developing world.²⁶⁸ It is there that we find text as more than written records. They can be forms of God’s Spirit as seen through, “music, statuary, and paintings. All these forms could be considered meaningful traces that witness to God’s Spirit in the world, and thus be open to interpretation, each in their own way.”²⁶⁹ Perrin continues, “the hermeneutical method encourages readers to be as open as possible before the text, and to employ a method that will allow the text to speak without absolutely imposing upon it predetermined meanings.”²⁷⁰ As such this hermeneutical reading “is the favored reading – there is room for both the text and the life experience of the reader to be brought forward.”²⁷¹ A hermeneutical reading of texts is a helpful method that:

1. Allows texts to speak in different times and places;
2. Uses numerous analytical techniques (for example, literary analysis, theological analysis, feminist analysis) to open up the text;
3. Acknowledges that interpretation always takes place in particular circumstances (for example, historical, political, and ethical circumstances) that have an impact on the of the text;

²⁶⁶ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 193.

²⁶⁷ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 193.

²⁶⁸ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 193.

²⁶⁹ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 188.

²⁷⁰ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 204.

²⁷¹ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 205.

4. Values the personal life story as one of the factors that the reader brings to the text in order to tease out current meaning;
5. Goes beyond a search for facts or objective information (knowledge) that the author wanted to convey to the reader;
6. Acknowledges that texts only make sense in the context of a life; they are meaningful only inasmuch as they assist the reader, and the reading community, to encounter the text as a dynamic, transformative event.²⁷²

And thus, “through its collective wisdom, the reading community is able to embrace new meanings in the texts that are already important in the life of a particular Christian community, or to embrace texts that hitherto have been largely unnoticed.”²⁷³

This speaks to the everyday mysticism Perrin discusses throughout his book. When we engage the world as texts, we are transformed and transform our communities. This new wisdom, much like the wisdom of which Parker and Wimberly write, has the power to connect us more fully to ourselves and God. Of this everyday mysticism, Perrin states, “Christian mysticism is not the privilege of a select few, as has often been emphasized in the Christian traditions.”²⁷⁴ Instead, Christian mysticism is part of the “potential reality of everyday life.”²⁷⁵ In this potential reality of everyday life, Perrin says this of mysticism:

Mysticism has more to do with the passionate love affair between God and humanity that shows itself in social life than it has to do with private, extraordinary occurrences. It is this love affair that has resulted in the transformation and growth of individuals, faith communities, and society in many different ways over the course of the development of the Christian traditions.²⁷⁶

²⁷² Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 205.

²⁷³ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 204.

²⁷⁴ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 240.

²⁷⁵ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 239.

²⁷⁶ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 243.

This mysticism can be found in the ways in which we as texts engage pilgrimage, as pilgrimage is always “a search for God and God’s goodness.”²⁷⁷ This true pilgrimage according to Perrin “has to do with a change of heart. The outward journey serves to frame an inner journey: a journey of repentance and rebirth; a journey which seeks a deeper faith, greater holiness, a journey in search of God.”²⁷⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook says this of pilgrimage: “Pilgrims go on a sacred journeys seeking nourishment and replenishment for every part of themselves. Even in relative solitude a pilgrim is always in relationship—with the self, with the Divine, with the natural environment.”²⁷⁹ For both Perrin and Holbrook, pilgrimages are a journey inward and outward, in solitude and in community.

In general, “pilgrimages invite individuals to step outside of themselves, to look at the world in a different way. Pilgrims leave familiar places, ways of doing things, and comfortable attitudes to explore what else might be possible for their lives.”²⁸⁰ According to Perrin, in an interdisciplinary approach theology is seen not as the firm commitment to a set of beliefs, but rather a commitment to remain open to the growth of knowledge concerning humanity’s relationship with God and God’s presence in the world.²⁸¹ Theology then, ultimately involves becoming “one who actively pursues the quest to discover God’s surprising and transformative

²⁷⁷ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 286.

²⁷⁸ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 286.

²⁷⁹ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage—the Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart* (Woodstock, VT: Sky Light Paths, 2013), 43.

²⁸⁰ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 289.

²⁸¹ Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 38.

presence in all the dimensions of life.”²⁸² Leading Christian spiritual researcher Philip Sheldrake would call this becoming a “*theological person*.”²⁸³

Sports and Spirituality

Catherine Albanese speaks of sports as rituals and sacred. She notes, “mainstream American culture offers the public not just a ritual calendar and sacred stories and models, but also guidelines for living. Sports, technology, popular psychology, and ideas about nature all provide behavioral roles for many.”²⁸⁴ She names the historical beginnings of sports in religious ritual, observing that “ceremonial games functioned at the center of many Native American traditions in this country. In ancient Greece, funeral games honored slain heroes, and various Greek city-states held sacred games to offer reverence to one of the Gods.”²⁸⁵ Albanese continues,

Both traditional religious rituals and sports divide the time of their performance from the ordinary passage of minutes and hours. In both, people take on assigned roles, often wearing special symbolic clothing to distinguish them from nonparticipants. Sports and deliberate religious rituals, through their performances, create ‘other’ worlds of meaning, complete with their own rules and boundaries, dangers and successes.²⁸⁶

Albanese similarly discusses the inception of the Olympics as descended from religious ritual.

She says, “in an echo of these games, there are many ways in which even the sports of the

²⁸² Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 38.

²⁸³ Philip Sheldrake, “Spirituality and Its Critical Methodology,” in *Exploring Christian Spiritualities: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, ed. B. Lescher and E. Liebert (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 25.

²⁸⁴ Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2013), 295.

²⁸⁵ Albanese, *America*, 295.

²⁸⁶ Albanese, *America*, 295.

contemporary United States are like (extraordinary) religious rituals. Like them, sports events mark out a separate area for their activities—a ‘playground’ or sacred space.”²⁸⁷

For Albanese, “in sports, and deliberate religious rituals, the goal of the activity is the activity. Play or ritual is satisfying for its own sake.”²⁸⁸ Because they are so common in our society and culture, sports provide a “ritual-like setting for millions of Americans. By setting up boundaries and defining the space of the game, sports have helped Americans fit a grid to their own experience in order to define it and give it structure.”²⁸⁹ Albanese expands the conversation as she discusses the cultural impact of sports on our societal and religious lives.

Public games have given people a code of conduct for everyday living. If the ball field is a miniature rehearsal for the game of life, the message is that life is a struggle between contesting forces in which there is a winning and losing side. The message, too, is that success depends on teamwork in which members of the winning side conquer the opposing team by pulling together. In this contest, competition becomes a value in itself and generates a set of accompanying virtues that identify a good team player. Loyalty, fair play, and being a ‘good sport’ in losing are all examples of these virtues. So are self-denial and hard work to achieve victory.²⁹⁰

She concludes by naming this “millennial battle” as a “scriptural story” seen through “good teams (our side) and bad ones (the opposing side).”²⁹¹ It is in this battle that “coaches urge the members of their team to pour all their efforts into winning—as if this were the last game they would play on earth.”²⁹² Finally, she notes that “the code of cultural religion expresses [the]

²⁸⁷ Albanese, *America*, 295.

²⁸⁸ Albanese, *America*, 295.

²⁸⁹ Albanese, *America*, 295.

²⁹⁰ Albanese, *America*, 295–96.

²⁹¹ Albanese, *America*, 296.

²⁹² Albanese, *America*, 296.

norms of behavior guided by sports...expressing one or another side of millennial belief and commitment.”²⁹³

While coaching at the University of Dayton, I invited sports psychologist Joel Fish to work with my basketball team. Fish examines the ways we “play” in sports and in life. He notes,

In sports you cannot script the outcome of events. You can’t always get what you want. We cannot guarantee that our sports-playing kids will have a good time or a good experience. We cannot guarantee that as parents we won’t make some mistakes...(but) if you are knowledgeable and aware of what your child is experiencing emotionally and physically in sports, you will be better able to give...the right kind of love, support, guidance, and encouragement.²⁹⁴

Fish begins his list of *101 Ways To Be A Terrific Sports Parent* with, “give your child unconditional love, no matter what happens.”²⁹⁵ Noting, that “kids need to be constantly reminded of the love and positive feelings we have toward them. This goes for kids of all ages.”²⁹⁶ Fish encourages that parents “become a broken record with the message ‘I love you when you win. I love you just as much when you lose.’”²⁹⁷ And so we begin to see the interdisciplinary aspect of play as it is mediated through practical theology. As an athlete, play is part and parcel of my spiritual formation and development. It is in play that we see the intersections of lived experience and God.

While several books have engaged the relationship between religion and sport, very few provide the in-depth examination of the concepts that both religion and sport share. As a person

²⁹³ Albanese, *America*, 296.

²⁹⁴ Joel Fish, *101 Ways To Be A Terrific Sports Parent: Making Athletics a Positive Experience for Your Child* (New York: Fireside, 2003), 4.

²⁹⁵ Fish, *101 Ways*, 4.

²⁹⁶ Fish, *101 Ways*, 4.

²⁹⁷ Fish, *101 Ways*, 4.

who has lived and worked professionally in both religion and sports, I suggest that Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower have a particularly well-constructed argument that suggests sports and religion are part and parcel of the same cultural web.

In their book, *Religion and Sports in American Culture*, Scholes and Sassower propose a way to understand the current relationship between religion and sports by providing a deep and broad analysis of the interplay of a shared vocabulary. Each chapter takes one of the following singular concepts: belief, sacrifice, relics, pilgrimage, competition, work and redemption, and examines its historical and theoretical lens. Each concept is further considered in light of its biblical expression and classic Western religious understandings; it is then assessed by how athletes and fans interpret the shared terminology. Each concept is then further interpreted by contextualizing its religious landscape in light of social theories. This analysis supports their claim that sports and religion adjoin around religion and social theory. Scholes and Sassower concede, “It’s no longer a contest between sports and religion or sports vs. religion, but an accommodation in the cultural web that includes sports *and* religion.” ²⁹⁸

The authors acknowledge and skim trends in the academic treatment of sports and religion, trends they parse along disciplinary lines such as the historical, sociological, economic, theological, and personal or autobiographical. They argue, however, that their approach is a cultural one. Scholes and Sassower’s framework of “seeing of sports and religion as cultural expressions (their language, their actions)” is one they insist “prevents putting one above another, as if it could be accomplished anymore.”²⁹⁹ They maintain that a “cultural analysis of

²⁹⁸ Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 22.

²⁹⁹ Joseph L. Price, ed., *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2001), 17.

the relationship between religion and sports holds the promise of exposing the way they relate in a post secular context.”³⁰⁰ Scholes and Sassower lay their cultural lens framework alongside Joseph Price’s, *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* that holds five ways religion and sports have historically interacted: “religion and sports in conflict,”³⁰¹ “sports commingling with religion,”³⁰² “religion conscripting sports,”³⁰³ “sports co-opting religion,”³⁰⁴ and “sports supplanting religion.”³⁰⁵

Scholes and Sassower, both philosophers, recognize that religion is primary for Price and that therefore his use of culture is to show that sport is essentially religious. Scholes and Sassower have a different goal in mind, a goal, they argue, that shows the interconnectivity of both religion and sport. Scholes and Sassower conclude that since we live in a post secular, postmodern world, we are capable of moving more fluidly from sacred to profane and back again. For them, there is little to gain in creating a binary between sports and religion. They suggest it is more useful to recognize that sports and religion inform one another and should be seen as equals. Scholes and Sassower further contend that this interconnectivity eliminates the need to privilege one over the other, and thus they point us toward new interpretative lens and new novel applications of each.

³⁰⁰ Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports*, 17.

³⁰¹ Price, *From Season to Season*, 17.

³⁰² Price, *From Season to Season*, 21.

³⁰³ Price, *From Season to Season*, 23.

³⁰⁴ Price, *From Season to Season*, 31.

³⁰⁵ Price, *From Season to Season*, 34.

Religion and Sports in American Culture is well researched and artfully written. Among the strengths of this book are its breadth and depth of engagement with mutual concepts outlined in each chapter. Scholes and Sassower handle well their location as philosophers, and are able to provide pertinent philosophical ideals, while simultaneously speaking practically about sport and religion—a feat often not handled well from the ivory tower, but commendably done here. In each chapter, Scholes and Sassower swing hard for the goals set forth in the book and connect solidly every time at bat.

Yet the authors acknowledge their omission of any substantial analysis of race, gender, class, and sexuality, and offer several examples in each chapter of said identities. A more vigorous and substantial analysis would add depth to the book and sharpen the relevance of their cultural framework. One would be justified in thinking that a so-called “cultural” framework without any identity politics may not be a Western cultural framework at all. What or whose “culture” are we speaking about? This oversight not only weakens, but also undermines the usefulness of this otherwise well researched and important book, particularly since the sports world is among the most diverse institutions in Western culture.

Nevertheless, the use of familiar concepts found in both religion and sport is a clever and rich way to frame the analysis. Scholes and Sassower note, for example, that “sports is religious in some sense and knowledge of religion is helpful in explaining tragedies and triumphs that occur in sports on a regular basis,”³⁰⁶ and “likewise, religion is an athletic activity in some sense and knowledge of sports is helpful in explaining tragedies and triumphs in one’s religious life.”³⁰⁷ And so, germane to the conversation is the importance of spirituality and sports through

³⁰⁶ Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports*, 22.

³⁰⁷ Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports*, 22.

Black women's experiences such as mine.

Post-Game II

In this dissertation, I ask, what is missing from my chosen fields of scholarship? Upon engaging that question deeply, I found major gaps among womanist, practical theology, spiritual formation, and sports scholarly work. As a Christian, I am drawing upon womanist scholarship and yet expanding the conversation beyond the Black church that has coopted Walker's definition of womanism, instead refocusing the conversation on Walker's mystic spirituality and then adding insights from my own experience, spiritual and athletic. Much like Walker, Barbara Holmes' scholarship moves away from the traditional understanding of womanist theology into a womanist spirituality. Her audience is both within and outside the traditional Black church. Melanie Harris' womanism continues what Holmes began and extends beyond the Black church with her Womanist Humanism. Harris' work calls for an expanded womanist theology that embraces pluralism, for Walker's womanism was deliberately pluralistic. While I greatly appreciate Harris' move, I am not a humanist and do not employ that hermeneutic in my scholarship. Thus, in my research I have found few scholars who (a) embrace Walker's original womanism, and (b) speak of womanism outside of the Black church context. This dissertation enters into the space of womanist spirituality that exists outside the Black church and seeks to embrace all forms of spiritual and religious expressions. It enters the space with a renewed understanding of womanist spirituality and employs the distinctions Perrin makes between spirituality and religion.

In the case of the classical practical theologians, missing from their ranks are Black women's voices. There is no Black woman theologian's scholarship that has been canonized or identified as classic. This is a major gap in practical theology. As the voices of queer Black

women in womanism are few in number, so too is the scholarship concerning practical theology and the lived experiences of Black women. Ganzevoort and Osmer both advocate for the person as text through the acknowledgement of lived experiences. And yet Black women have not been included in the conversation. In addition, there are limited queer voices in practical theology and spiritual formation. While there are scholars such as Phillis Isabella Sheppard and Toinette Eugene who write from a queer embodied location, scholarship is significantly lacking from queer black women in the fields. Hamman (a South African) spoke of the importance of play in one's spiritual life yet made no mention of Black women or scholarship from Black women pertaining to this topic.

Spirituality and sports are a tandem often overlooked. Albanese walked through the historical genesis of this duo and yet she was the only woman authority on this topic. Most of the research consisted of white, heterosexual, men. Upon investigation, I found that there have been few Black women athletes who have spoken about spirituality in sports, and certainly no athletes with theological training. Their works are autobiographical rather than academically theological. In researching queer theory in theology, I found Althaus-Reid's theology fitting for the purposes of this research. While I am not a queer theorist, by my very embodiment, I employ queer theory in every context of my life. Queer theology is a field that has grown over the years and yet there are very few Black queer women represented. I found no sources that acknowledge the intersections of Black, queer, woman, theologian, and athletic identity. My research aims to speak to the intersections of Black, queer, woman, athlete, and theologian in spiritual formation, using Womanist spirituality.

In the field of spiritual formation within practical theology, Wimberly and Parker use wisdom as a vehicle for highlighting Black women's lived experience. Again, while expanding

the conversation from commonly understood womanism, their context is still within the Black church. Perrin discusses the importance of lived experience much as Wimberly and Parker, do. He talks about community and takes the discussion of spirituality outside the confines of church proper. He, like Holmes and Harris, moves from the traditional epistemological understanding of religion and embraces the creativity in spirituality. This is not done at religion's expense; it is simply an expansion of the conversation. Unfortunately, the field of spiritual formation lacks theological scholarship from Black women in general, and queer embodied black women in particular. To my point of this research, I have not found scholars in spiritual formation, spirituality and sports, practical theology, womanist theology, or queer theology that speak to my location. As such, this research attempts to close this particular gap in the fields of spiritual formation and practical theology.

I embrace the history of the Black church while queering its very nature, and as such expand the conversation beyond the confines of the traditional Black church context. In womanist scholarship, I distance myself from the Black church paradigm and embrace Walker's mysticism. I enter as a queer womanist athlete; another intersection that has been overlooked in scholarship. My womanist lineage is Walker, Holmes, and Harris as they embody the essence of what it means, for me, to embrace a womanist spirituality. In spirituality and sports there is no representation of my intersections in scholarship and thus I am queering this field. In the field of spiritual formation, the lived experiences of Black women have been scant. While there are some that have been represented in scholarship, for example, Evelyn Parker and arguably, Teresa Fry Brown, Black women have been overlooked and dismissed from scholarship. When our lives have been taken into account, it has been only through the lens of the Black church. This is no longer acceptable as the academy shifts in representation. In this way *Queer and Queering: A*

Womanist Spirituality of Sports speaks to the important gaps in Spiritual Formation and Sports that call for my exact locations.

Chapter 3 **The Playbook: Autoethnography as Method**

Pre-Game III

In this chapter I discuss what autoethnography is, how it was developed, how it is done, ways it is used in research, and how I engage it as a method.

Definitions of Autoethnography

Various scholars have defined autoethnography in unique and distinctive ways. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay defines autoethnography as, “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text.”³⁰⁸ Tami Spry suggests that, “Autoethnography is a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context.”³⁰⁹ Other methods such as case study, phenomenology or grounded theory mostly use observations, documents, and multiple interviews as means of data collection. Autoethnography explores the individual stories of the researcher as a means of offering social, theological, and cultural critique.

Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process, it

³⁰⁸ Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, ed., *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (New York: Berg Press, 1997), 6.

³⁰⁹ Tami Spry, “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 6 (December 1, 2001): 710.

seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living.³¹⁰

John W. Creswell agrees, stating that the use of autoethnography is a form of narrative research. He explains, “narrative studies can be differentiated along two different lines. One line is to consider data analysis strategy used by the narrative researcher. Another is to consider the types of narratives.”³¹¹ Creswell continues that autoethnographies “contain [the] personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story.”³¹²

Carolyn Ellis compares being an autoethnographer with being a storyteller:

As an autoethnographer, I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed...I am the person at the intersection of the person and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller.³¹³

Leon Anderson defines autoethnography as analytic. Analytic autoethnography has five key features. It is ethnographic work in which the researcher:

- (a) Is a full member in a research group or setting.
- (b) Uses analytic reflexivity.
- (c) Has a visible narrative presence in the written text.
- (d) Engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self;
- (e) Is committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 10.

³¹¹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 72.

³¹² Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 73.

³¹³ C. Ellis, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 13.

³¹⁴ Leon Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (August 1, 2006): 374.

With her background in the Black church and Black culture, Stacy Holman Jones defines autoethnography as,

A blurred game...a response to the call...[I]t is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art...making a text present...refusing categorization...believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world.³¹⁵

And so, “These conventions serve to define autoethnographic method as a distinct approach to the study of human experience. They shape how lives are told, performed, and understood. In so doing, they create the subject matter of the autoethnographic approach.”³¹⁶ As autoethnography is “reflexively writing the self into and through the ethnographic text: isolating the space where memory, history, performance and meaning intersect,”³¹⁷ it is important to understand how it came to be.

Autoethnography is a method from the womb of qualitative research, and qualitative research was gestated in the womb of psychology. For this reason, tracing the line of exemplars from psychology is an important place to begin. Psychologists Sigmund Freud, William James, Abraham Maslow, Gordon Allport, and Jerome Bruner have all contributed to the genesis of autoethnography from the womb of narrative methodologies.

While engaging lived experiences through narrative was not new, Freud was one of the first to hear the stories of his patients and use their life experiences as a valid place of “research.” He used their artwork, life stories, pictures, and diaries as ways to reconstruct his patients’ well-

³¹⁵ Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 765.

³¹⁶ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:7.

³¹⁷ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:22.

being.³¹⁸ Through his unorthodox method of collecting data, Freud could draw “upon all of these sources in his analyses and argued against the medical establishment that rigorous research of human experience requires a broad interdisciplinary education and training.”³¹⁹ “Pragmatic, therapeutic goals led Freud to innovatively transform traditional etiological research into what is called *hermeneutic* and *narrative* inquiry.”³²⁰

James, who endeared himself to theologians through his work on spiritual exercises, was the first to investigate and validate a person’s experiences as a fitting place for discovery and wholeness over and against theological dogma and construction.

James’s research practices focused on the subjective experience, the ‘personal’, ‘existential’ point of view, in contrast to theistic dogma, on the one hand, and materialistic facts, on the other. He insisted on holism-taking experiences in the whole of life. He placed aside abstract conceptualizations of the subject matter and instead worked with highly detailed, concrete examples of his subject matter offered by ordinary people who had genuinely lived through and articulately expressed the experiences under investigation. James noted the methodological value of extreme real-life examples of his subject matter, and he deliberately sought out many cultural and historical variations...used and advocated dramatic, evocative language in conveying his findings, viewing this kind of discourse as appropriate for knowledge of personal subjective experience.”³²¹

Continuing in the lineage of James, we see the expansion in Maslow’s work as he points to experience and flow. He constructed a “both-and” over and against an “either-or framework for hearing, understanding, and valuing a person’s experiences and stories rather than artificially forcing a person to have to choose between them. Maslow points toward peak experiences,

³¹⁸ Frederick J. Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 20.

³¹⁹ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 23.

³²⁰ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 21.

³²¹ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 29.

noting that “in these experiences, the world becomes more unified, persons become more themselves, and conduct is more easeful and effortless.”³²² Maslow, unlike Freud and James, viewed scientific nature as “deficient in an academic field dominated by behaviorism. Maslow did not consider his research [to be] science.”³²³ Instead, Maslow’s research “was aimed at revealing what is uniquely human in a holistic, rigorous way.”³²⁴ It began “from a personal quest and served his vision of a better future for humanity. His science was also a quest for enlightenment and wisdom.”³²⁵ Through his research, Maslow, “developed a cyclic, iterative procedure in which he began with common folk understandings of his subject matter, and through successive cycles of data collection and analysis, achieved conceptual clarity that surpassed prior knowledge with a new scientific precision.”³²⁶

Going further in the development of narrative research, Gordon Allport was the first to consider and argue for the validity of narratives over and against scientific research. He “developed a monograph that inventoried and evaluated all research in psychology that used first-person data in 1942.”³²⁷ One of his many conclusions was that “personal documents have tremendous potential in generating psychological knowledge.”³²⁸

He insisted on the importance of both ‘ideographic’ (individual, case study) and ‘nomothetic’ (population frequency and aggregate analyses) knowledge in psychology and showed that analysis of personal documents is indispensable for both. He asserted

³²² Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 35.

³²³ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 29.

³²⁴ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 36.

³²⁵ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 36.

³²⁶ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 36.

³²⁷ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 43.

³²⁸ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 43.

that this kind of research is necessary for knowledge of subjective meaning. He considered qualitative methods to be valuable in their own right and superior to other methods in the investigation of meaning.³²⁹

Allport concluded that, “‘bold and radical’ innovation doing research with personal documents should be encouraged and undertaken in psychology.”³³⁰

Jerome Bruner would further enhance the field with his work on firsthand narrative experiences. He recognized that stories are fundamental building blocks of human experience and argued that the validity and reliability of narratives was far superior to scientific knowledge:

Bruner continually linked narrative and culture. Culture creates the realm of stories that are deemed acceptable, defining a tension between the expected life and what is humanly possible. Sharing common stories creates a community and promotes cultural cohesion. [He] elaborated his belief that interpretation, through narrative, is central to being human; it is how we bring meaning and order to life.³³¹

And so, given the lineage of scholarship in psychology in regard to narrative research, I turn to autoethnography.

Autoethnography in Practical Theology

Beginning with systematic theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who understood dualism as not to be an absolute and that knowledge was bounded by experience, we find the underpinning for practical theological autoethnographic method(s). John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, in *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, state, “practical theology locates itself within the diversity of human experience, making its home in the complex web of

³²⁹ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 43–44.

³³⁰ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 44.

³³¹ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 65.

relationships and experiences that form the fabric of all we know.”³³² Browning, in *A*

Fundamental Practical Theology, adds,

To think and act practically in fresh and innovative ways may be the most complex thing that humans attempt...Our overheated and rapidly changing technological societies are requiring us to turn these corners of cultural deconstruction and reconstruction more often.³³³

And so, “‘method’ then becomes not a set of techniques and procedures, but ways of thinking about inquiry, modes of exploring questions, and creative approaches to offering one’s constructed findings to the scholarly community.”³³⁴

Practical theologians can also be public theologians who investigate ways in which theological concepts or ways of thinking underlie political, social, economic and cultural discourse. Suzanne Coyle adds,

Spiritual narratives draw from both an explicit and implicit theological grounding as well as from insights of narrative practice. Providing a multivoiced conversation between narrative therapy and liberation theology is essential in laying both theological and practice focused foundations for uncovering those spiritual narratives. Narrative therapy provides a psychotherapeutic approach supportive of life stories. Liberation theology supports a spirituality focused on social justice. Both common life and transcendent spiritual experiences populate spiritual narratives in people’s lives.³³⁵

And this is how autoethnography has grounding in practical theology. It is through personal story—the lived experience—theological reflection and social critique are engaged.

Rogers utilizes this form of spiritual narrative through narrative pedagogical methods. Namely, he teaches through personal experience (autoethnography) to critique cultural norms,

³³² John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), Kindle edition, 165.

³³³ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 7.

³³⁴ Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, 66.

³³⁵ Suzanne M. Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 17.

speak to trauma, and engage nonviolent compassion-based methods for social healing and transformation.

Rogers' *finding god in the graffiti*, highlights an important aspect of story as it pertains to the autoethnographic method. He contends, "knowing a community entails learning that community's story, and joining a community entails making that story one's own."³³⁶ Rogers emphasizes three key components to religious literacy through narrative pedagogy (paraphrasing):

1. Help people learn the core stories that form the heritage and identity of their particular faith tradition.
2. Enable theological and ethical reflection grounded in these stories.
3. Encourage people to join the story – to internalize these stories as their own, to interpret the world through these stories' lenses, and to respond in ways that participate with the stories of faithful unfolding.³³⁷

He goes on to say, "narratives are saturated with assumptions—about gender, race, power, violence, God, the 'good,' the 'bad,' the 'other'—assumptions that are subliminally absorbed when the stories themselves are assimilated."³³⁸ This is exemplary of the ability of autoethnographic method in the practical theological discourse. It positions itself from a particular standpoint—in this case nonviolence and justice—and sets to critique cultural and societal norms.

In this way, critical reflection fosters deeper engagement with the self (as text) and the larger communities we live (also as text). Rogers explains extensively,

Critical reflection narrative nurture[s] a critical consciousness about the cultural narratives that shape us. They raise to awareness the stories that are so ingrained that their

³³⁶ Frank Rogers Jr., *finding God in the graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Story* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2011), Kindle edition, 742.

³³⁷ Rogers, *finding God in the graffiti*, 721-742.

³³⁸ Rogers, *finding God in the graffiti*, 1956.

influence upon us is too close to see—fairy tales, for example, so commonplace a child can recite them; sacred stories sanctified with canonical status; or Hollywood blockbusters with plotlines so familiar we take for granted their mythic pattern. They invite [us] to scrutinize the axiomatic assumptions embedded within a narrative, and they empower [us] to think for [our]selves and tell subversive stories. Such pedagogy should come with a warning label. It can be dangerous.³³⁹

Through narrative pedagogical practices, autoethnography becomes one method used for critical engagement. What does this mean for this spiritual community? It simply affirms the variety of ways in which theology can be embodied and articulated. As we seek to deepen our connections with the Sacred and with each other, we find autoethnography the perfect conduit.

How We Do Autoethnography

Autoethnography holds as valid and reliable sources of truth lived experience, stories, and personal and communal narratives. Thus, its research tools can include, but are not limited to, a variety of ways of finding and interpreting narratives and/or stories. A researcher may use interviews, genograms, pictures, historical documents, obituaries, communal narratives, family narratives, diaries, storytellers, and other like means to obtain information to begin to construct the story. The researcher may construct the private story and the public story, and begin, like perhaps a patchwork quilt maker, to piece seemingly disparate patches to bring to light a coherent whole.

Many womanist theologians, biblical scholars, ethicists, and others, while not explicitly naming autoethnography as a method, have been exemplary users of it. I highlight the two who have been most formative in my emerging scholarship. First, womanist legend, Katie Geneva Cannon, uses autoethnography often in her works. For example, Cannon uses an autoethnographical approach in *Katie's Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black*

³³⁹ Rogers, *finding God in the graffiti*, 1959-1960.

Community. She uses the introduction and appendix to frame the collection of essays from a ten-year period. In this way she uses autoethnography as a “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context”³⁴⁰ as she situates herself in the midst of the “cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller.”³⁴¹

Second, Monica Coleman could be said to be using a form of autoethnography in her courageous work, *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman’s Journey with Depression and Faith*. In Coleman’s *Making A Way out of No Way*, her first words are “Theology is autobiography.”³⁴² She continues:

This phrase is often invoked to illustrate that our constructive theological proposals are intensely personal. They are shaped by our personal histories, our past and current contexts, the specific issues that concern us. They are shaped by whom and what we have encountered—what we read, whom we know, those whom we engage in conversation.³⁴³

Coleman says the book “reflects my own faith and social commitments.”³⁴⁴ In its introduction, Coleman grounds, calls for, and proceeds in the following chapters to frame a post-modern womanist theology born from life experiences. Coleman here is doing autoethnography in the way that Tami Spry explains:

not simply [as] a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively....not only [to] examine our lives but also [to] consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do.

³⁴⁰ Spry, “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis,” 710.

³⁴¹ C. Ellis, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 13.

³⁴² Monica A. Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Black Woman’s Journey with Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), ix.

³⁴³ Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way*, ix.

³⁴⁴ Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way*, ix.

Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be....it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living.³⁴⁵

In Coleman's latest work, *Bipolar Faith*, she also utilizes an autoethnographic approach, albeit differently than her earlier work. In this way, Coleman showcases autoethnography's dexterity.

In *Bipolar Faith*, Coleman employs an autoethnographic approach such as Holman Jones calls a blurred game:

...a response to the call...[I]t is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art...making a text present...refusing categorization...believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world."³⁴⁶

Coleman's deeply personal struggle and journey with depression and faith has clearly been a text from a theologian that has "changed the world"—and by this we get a glimpse of the power and usefulness of this method.³⁴⁷

Both Cannon and Coleman offer different ways in which autoethnography can be used in the field of theology. Each has its own merit, each underscoring the significance and impact of autoethnography. As a result of the construction of autoethnography from the scholars mentioned above I used autoethnography through themes of pilgrimage to explore the ways in which sports have been spiritually formative in my life. Through my deep engagement with particular experiences, I gleaned wisdom from those events that held within them transformative spiritual qualities. It was then important to ask myself what nuggets of experience laid within my life as

³⁴⁵ Jones, Adams, and Ellis, *Handbook of Autoethnography*, 10.

³⁴⁶ Jones, "Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political," 765.

³⁴⁷ Monica A. Coleman, *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).

an athlete that shaped my beliefs and understanding about God, humanity, and nature. Within this autoethnographic method I offer insight and critique of social norms and systems while holding to a deeper spirituality that evolved from my time on the court. Autoethnography is used throughout my dissertation as a means of inviting the reader into self-reflection of sports and play, through the invitation of my own story, and wisdom gleaned in order to enter the space of flow. It is through flow that I propose and construct Point Guard Spirituality and QWEST as a way of living out this particular spirituality.

Criticisms and Challenge

Critics of autoethnography argue that autoethnography is not valid, reliable, or truthful. The most common criticisms and challenges of autoethnography include: the interpretive account of stories are biased; nonanalytic, self-absorbed, too artful, not scientific, sentimental, romantic; too little field work, small sample sizes; lacks reliability, generalizability, validity; calls into question the credibility of the narrator.³⁴⁸ Other challenges include: having the capacity for sufficiently extensive data collection; the ability to identify source material that gathers particular stories to capture the individual's experiences; active collaboration of informants; the researcher being able to discuss the participant's stories as well as be reflective about their own personal and political background, which shapes how they re-story the account. Lastly, the most powerful critiques come in the form of questions: Who owns the story? Who can tell the story? Who can change it? Whose version is convincing? And, what happens when the narrative is complete?³⁴⁹ These critiques and challenges prompt us to consider the importance of autoethnographical ethics and values.

³⁴⁸ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:68.

³⁴⁹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 76.

While the challenges to autoethnography are many, one must consider the enormous cost to the writer who is willing to tell an authentic truth about their life. The pain of recounting the journey, the sacrifice of the truth telling that may hurt or harm other individuals or institutions, even perhaps at the cost of one's career, all need to be taken into account. To be sure, the Quaker intuition to "speak truth to power" does not come without consequence. On the one hand, removing oneself from the demand of making something autobiographical can ensure a safer place in which to dwell, and may be viable and even necessary for one's physical safety and mental equanimity. However, to risk the consequences to oneself and to others allows for a more immediate and often more generative connection with one's audience. Autoethnographers respond that validity is translated as the credibility of the researcher. Reliability is often measured by the narrative's capacity to evoke in the reader feelings that move the reader to action.

For example, in 1999 Cannon was explicit about this inner turmoil in an interview with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot published in *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*.

Lawrence-Lightfoot subsequently commented on the experience of interviewing Cannon:

The depth of trauma rings out in Cannon's use of the word "chasm" indicating the great separations in her life that need to be bridged and reconciled in her middle years...She must find a way to see the contradictions, name them, reckon with them, and pull them into a whole. The divisions between public persona and private self, between privilege and poverty, between African-American roots and feminism, between white paternalistic canon and Katie's Cannon.³⁵⁰

She continues,

Katie knows that reconciliation will not come through denying the contradictions or masking the pain. If reconciliation is to emerge, she knows it will always be fragile with small and large compromise...Wholeness will not come out of erasing them, or even

³⁵⁰ Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 107.

easing them. It will come out of embracing them *and* learning to move between (and among) them with purposefulness, grace, and humor.³⁵¹

Cannon was forty-one at the time of this interview. She would be dead in less than 25 years. The interview and the Lawrence-Lightfoot's reflections on it highlight the depth of inner work and reckoning that comes with writing in an autoethnographic manner and with exposing oneself for the liberation of others. For autoethnography to have its fullest impact, a writer must be willing to enter into these depths and allow a deep reckoning in order to extract the most authentic expression of oneself. It is in this authenticity that credibility and resonance with others arises and creates the possibilities for transformation and change.

Yet for early womanist scholars autoethnography was simply not an option. Spaces that questioned and devalued their very personhood and that of their ancestors made it necessary for them to resort to third spaces—an in between or hybrid space—to do to their work. Even as these early womanists made paths in the academy, they wisely looked to pioneering Black women writers outside of theology. To be sure, to keep a place in the academy, their own life experiences were often muted as the risks and possible consequences to their careers, themselves, and others were simply too great. Even now, despite the exhaustive work of this All-Star Womanist Katie Cannon, there remain many within the academy that echo criticisms raised against autoethnography. Of both autoethnography and of womanist scholarship, critics allege that the work is nonanalytic, self-indulgent, irreverent, not scientific, not rigorous, that it lacks reliability, credibility, and so forth. Perhaps for these reasons and others, Black women's voices in practical theology and spiritual formation are scant.

The criticisms lodged against autoethnography, even if valid, do not hold sway, particularly for Black women and other racialized people. Not that Black women's contributions

³⁵¹ Lawrence-Lightfoot, *I've Known Rivers*, 107.

to practical theology and spiritual formation are beyond critique, but that they must be understood within their historical context. As children of enslaved people, it was *only* through the telling of stories carried in the bosoms of Black people that an entire people have survived. More than survival, we had embedded in us the means to thrive and that is through *story*.

There are multiple and sometimes ostensibly conflicting reasons that make autoethnography powerful and useful, and these reasons do not always have to do primarily with objectivity and factual accuracy. Sometimes they have to do with survival. And life takes precedence over accuracy. The heartbeat of the womanist ethos— “Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” —is best established and maintained through an autoethnographical approach. After all, these first-person accounts are how an entire people survived. The first-person account is how we came into being. The first-person account of a storytelling family or community member is how children were raised and are charged with the responsibility to “Go tell.” It is this very autoethnographical approach that has enabled a moving from surviving to thriving, as a person and as a people.

That we receive the baton, the stories, and to run in (and outside) the lanes we have been given by scholars who have come before us, and to leave a trail for scholars who will come after, was our foremothers’ and forefathers’ expectation. While the academy may consider and critique the legitimacy of autoethnography, there is a generation now that is not asking for permission, that is not compelled or constrained by standards of old. Moreover, the people populating the academy is slowly changing. Increasingly it is becoming a population for which telling stories is a mother tongue.

The critiques of autoethnography are steeped in the norms of the academy whose audience has long been white and male. Perhaps autoethnography will no longer seek to be

legitimized by the folks who have traditionally held power and who have traditionally populated campuses. Perhaps instead it will gain legitimacy from an audience and scholars whose time has finally come and who have many platforms from which to be effective.

Ethics and Values

Autoethnography is about the value of voice as authoritative. It is also about who gets heard and what voices are prioritized over others. Autoethnography challenges the old paradigm of whose voice is prioritized, based as it is in personal, reflective, and reflexive experiences. Creswell notes that such “narrative research originated from literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education. Different fields of study have adopted their approaches.”³⁵² These “narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and how they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves.”³⁵³ In narrative inquiry, themes are extracted “that hold across stories or taxonomies of types of stories. A mere storytelling mode in which the narrative researcher shapes the stories based on a plotline.”³⁵⁴ “Narrative stories occur within specific places or situations. The context becomes important for the researcher’s telling of the story within a place.”³⁵⁵

Autoethnography is a transformative qualitative methodology. It is about moving others into ethical action through inspiration. As all autoethnography is done from a particular ethical standpoint or position, it reminds us how “criteria function as policing devices.”³⁵⁶ As Arthur

³⁵² Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 70–76.

³⁵³ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 71.

³⁵⁴ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 71.

³⁵⁵ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 72.

³⁵⁶ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:71.

Bochner, Patricia Clough, and Yvonna Christian write, all autoethnographic inquiry involves the political, ethical, and moral. Clough reminds us, that “the criticisms of standard ethnographic writing in sociology were linked to identity politics and feminist theory, and in anthropology to postcolonial criticisms. These criticisms involved a complex set of questions, namely who had the right to speak for whom and how.”³⁵⁷ Autoethnography is thus a countercultural approach in academia, and is therefore becoming largely the “voice” or method of the scholars on the margins—and not just scholars. We see examples of this in womanist, feminist and queer scholarship as voice from lived experience is primary. We also see examples of this in practical theology. The ethical core of autoethnography is thus demonstrating the value of lived experience, and how that lived experience illumines global issues. This leads to an analysis of intersectional locations.

The need for intersectionality, “became the focus of experimental writing in ethnography.”³⁵⁸ Clough adds, “just as there has been an effort to elaborate race, classed, sexed, and national identities in the autoethnographic writings of postcolonial theorists,”³⁵⁹ we see the importance of intersectional analysis in autoethnographic work. She continues, “these debates about writing, agency, self, subjectivity, nation, culture, race, and gender unfolded on a global landscape, involving the transnationalization of capital and the globalization of technology.”³⁶⁰ And so autoethnography is about access—access to the academy and access globally. Who has

³⁵⁷ Patricia Ticineto Clough, “Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2000): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040000600211>.

³⁵⁸ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:71.

³⁵⁹ Clough, “Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing,” 285.

³⁶⁰ Clough, “Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing,” 279.

access to what? In experimental autoethnographic writing, issues of “gender, race, family, nation, politics, capital, technology, critical social theory, and cultural criticism,”³⁶¹ are all connected to “debates over questions of knowledge, and its representation and presentation.”³⁶²

Clough circles back to one criterion in autoethnographic writing, “cultural criticism and theoretical reflection,”³⁶³ because the fear surrounding this claim is that hegemonic oppressive systems will silence cultural criticisms that autoethnographic accounts often voice. In such criticisms and claims, questions of voice, validity, and reliability converge. It is a familiar tactic, one common in courtroom settings where an opponent typically tries to discredit a witness’s account of something from their lived experience by discrediting the witness themselves. Autoethnography likewise has opponents who want to discredit the witness.

When white hegemonic power can discredit the voices of the marginalized, it has won. And thus, we have an ethical commitment to dismantling those systems through re-telling, synthesizing, and presenting our stories for cultural critique. Denzin adds, “discussions of criteria move in three directions at the same time: moral, political, and ethical; literary and aesthetic; trauma and the politics of experience.”³⁶⁴ For the purposes of this dissertation I discuss the moral, political, and ethical criteria through a feminist communitarian moral ethic.

Feminist criteria are meant to, “unsettle and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions concerning problematic issues in public life. They create space for dialogue and questions,

³⁶¹ Clough, “Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing,” 287.

³⁶² Clough, “Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing,” 287.

³⁶³ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:72.

³⁶⁴ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:72.

giving voice to positions previously silenced or ignored.”³⁶⁵ Additionally, and ideologically, “this performance aesthetic refuses assimilation to White middle-class norms and the traumas of that culture. [They] expose cracks in the ideological seams in these dominant cultural mythologies.”³⁶⁶ Within feminist criteria, Christians point to three interconnected criteria that shape representations of class, nation, gender, race, and family:

1. Interpretive Sufficiency – Accounts should possess that amount of depth, detail, emotionality, nuance, and coherence that will permit the formation of a critical consciousness, or conscientization [as coined by Paulo Freire], where the oppressed gain their own voice and collaborate in transforming their culture.
2. Representational Adequacy – These accounts should be free of racial, class, or gender stereotyping.
3. Authentic adequacy –Determined by three conditions. That accounts:
 - (a) represent multiple voices
 - (b) enhance moral discernment, and
 - (c) promote social transformation.³⁶⁷

When these criteria are met, “multivoiced ethnographic texts”³⁶⁸ empower people, “leading them to discover moral truths about themselves while generating criticism.”³⁶⁹ These criticisms lead to social transformation.

Patricia Hill Collins adds, “this is a dialogical epistemology and aesthetic. It involves give and take. It enacts an ethic of care and an ethic of personal and communal responsibility.”³⁷⁰

Clifford Christians suggests how such an epistemology and aesthetic can change things:

³⁶⁵ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:73.

³⁶⁶ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:73.

³⁶⁷ Clifford G. Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 145–48.

³⁶⁸ Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” 147.

³⁶⁹ Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” 147.

³⁷⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1st ed. (New York, New York: Routledge, 1991), 214.

Politically, this aesthetic imagines how truly democratic society might look, including one free of racial prejudice and oppression. This aesthetic values beauty and artistry, movement, rhythm, color, and texture in everyday life. It celebrates difference and the sounds of many voices. It expresses an ethic of empowerment. This ethic presumes a moral community that is ontologically prior to the person. This community has shared moral values, including the concepts of shared governance, neighborliness, love, kindness, and the moral good.³⁷¹

He continues,

This ethic embodies a sacred, existential epistemology that locates persons in a noncompetitive, nonhierarchical relationship to the larger moral universe. This ethic declares that all persons deserve dignity and a sacred status in the world. It stresses the value of human life, truth telling, and nonviolence.³⁷²

Through the principles of authentic adequacy, the moral, political, and ethical aesthetic fosters social criticism and promotes systemic resistance. “It helps persons imagine how things could be different. It imagines new forms of human transformation and emancipation. It enacts transformation through dialogue.”³⁷³

Brazilian practitioner, drama theorist and political activist, Augusto Boal, observes that “critical pedagogical theatre creates dialogical performances that follow these directives:

1. Every oppressed person is a subjugated subversive.
2. The cop in our head represents our submission to this oppression.
3. Each person possesses the ability to be subversive.
4. Critical pedagogical theatre can empower persons to be subversive while making their submission to oppression disappear.”³⁷⁴

I agree with his “directives,” and they are part of the ethic with which I embrace autoethnography as a qualitative research method. I am also informed by Womanist theory and

³⁷¹ Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” 144–49.

³⁷² Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” 147.

³⁷³ Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” 148.

³⁷⁴ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (London, UK: Routledge, 1995), 42.

subscribe to the theological importance of experience as formational. This is how I perform autoethnography throughout this dissertation.

Autoethnography, as scholarship is now calling it, is not a particularly new approach. Womanist scholars used their own locations to disrupt systems of power through narrative. Due to the overwhelming epistemic oppressions throughout the guild, autoethnography is really little more than a new name for an established methodology. Yet the academy has wrestled with the validity of autoethnography as a valid and reliable form of research. In this dissertation I use autoethnography as my method of data collection, a method that coincides with both feminist/womanist transgressive and transformative frameworks.

Autoethnography is full of epiphanies. Epiphanies, a term first used in this context by Osmer,³⁷⁵ “are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives. Personal character is manifested. [These moments] alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person’s life.”³⁷⁶ For “autoethnography re-tells and re-performs these life experiences as they intersect these sites. The life story becomes an invention, a re-presentation, an historical object often ripped or torn out of its contexts and recontextualized in the spaces and understandings of the story.”³⁷⁷ As “experience can be studied only through performance,”³⁷⁸ the “autoethnographer seeks to ‘extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived.’”³⁷⁹ Autoethnography is used as a transformative research method,

³⁷⁵ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 51.

³⁷⁶ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:52.

³⁷⁷ Christians, “Ethics and Politics in Qualitative Research,” 147.

³⁷⁸ Edward M. Bruner, “Experience and Its Expressions,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 6.

³⁷⁹ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 17:36.

which advances the transgressive work of story. For lived experiences of Black women and queer Black women can transform and expand traditional ontological underpinnings of communion. Creswell writes,

The issues facing these marginalized groups are of paramount importance to study, issues such as oppression, domination, suppression, alienation, and hegemony. As these issues are studied and exposed, the researcher provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness and improving their lives.³⁸⁰

And thus, through the recollection of my lived experiences I have discovered some things that are fundamental to me. Most specifically, I have found that communion is the overarching theme in my life.

Post-Game III

My life story is situated in the context of my cultural reality, religious heritage, gender, race, class, and sexuality. Those intersections show, through self-reflexivity, the epiphany of communion throughout this work. How story (lived experience) transforms and transgresses the hegemonic cultural milieu is the task at hand. Autoethnography, through this lens, lends itself to the dismantling of systems through personal reflection of one's own lived experience. No longer must the research be done from the top of the ivory tower.

The aim of this dissertation is to transgress hegemonic norms built on the shoulders of white European men as the standard of scholarship. Transgression then, first entails the creation of brave space from which to speak truths to systems of power. Through the creation of that space, painful experiences can then be shared and new epiphanies can form. In this way oppression is documented and possibilities are created through political and theological implications for justice and wholeness.

³⁸⁰ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26.

We are formed and informed by our experiences. I cannot separate the incorporation of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason in my life from “mystory.” And so, I use the epiphany of communion while acknowledging that the use of this autoethnographic method lends itself to many and intersecting epiphanies through our lived experiences. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the many expressions of communion to elucidate the many ways in which I have seen and experienced a theological understanding of communion.

Chapter 4

The “I” in Team: Sports and Spiritual Pilgrimage

Life is not a particular place or destination.

Life is a path.

~Thich Nhat Hanh

The journey is essential to the dream.

~Francis of Assisi (1182–1226)

When lived with intention, all of life can be seen as a sacred journey.

~Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook

Pre-Game IV

Stories have the potential to help us discover beauty, kindness, passion, creativity, hospitality, and generosity, thereby extending and creating in each moment, each encounter, each conversation new possibilities. For “within each moment, an entity is influenced by others, creates its own identity and propels itself into further experiences. Because of the involvement of all moments of experience with each other’s...the entire cosmos [is seen] as an organic whole.”³⁸¹ My life-changing pilgrimages, encounters, and spiritual practices have followed the aforementioned thought and have led me to an integration of self—an organic wholeness. To be sure, for new possibilities to emerge, risk and consequence were always part and parcel of every experience. Upon deeper reflection, I realize that on each occasion of beauty, kindness, passion, creativity, hospitality and generosity, I simultaneously felt a lure toward a door that held infinite possibilities, possibilities that were not always good or ethical, beautiful or generous.

The wisdom I have gained from the transformational aspects of my spiritual and sports journey are revealed in the laboratory of my life. I have discovered clues that have led me to greater awareness of the interconnectedness and interrelationality of all people and Earth, and

³⁸¹ Sheela Pawar, “A Synopsis of Process Thought,” Center for Process Studies, www.ctr4process.org/about/process/Synopsis.shtml (accessed October 12, 2012).

most poignantly, with myself. Sports have been the vehicle for my spiritual formation and also a spiritual practice for me. I have deepened my connection with God, play, teamwork, and good ethics on the court. To be sure, like a lover you cannot quit, I have fallen in and out of love with basketball in much the same way that I have fallen in and out of love with God. I have had to examine both of my true loves, pull each apart, divorce them both at times in my life, only to come back to that which I cannot quit, nor want to.

There have been connections that have lasted a lifetime and others that have been fleeting. In those spaces of doubt, joy, confusion, clarity, I find myself drawn to the principles I learned on the court and at my grandmother's table. Pilgrimage has always been part and parcel of my story. As Amy Benedict notes, "We think of a pilgrimage as a journey of great spiritual and moral significance—yet our whole life's course can be seen as a pilgrimage. A simple walk from your home and back can become a ritual to enact these sacred quests."³⁸² For "pilgrimage is about the search to recognize that call or to find ways to integrate it into adult life. Theologian Fredrick Buechner writes, 'the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.'"³⁸³ "In this way a sense of call evokes our passions...evokes a sense of purpose...a sense of call [that] emerges from within us."³⁸⁴ Being an athlete and coach created spaces for me to engage the many ways I delved into the depths of holy pilgrimages from the time I was a young girl. It is with this understanding that I trace my journey.

³⁸² Amy Benedict, "Deepen Your Practice: A Neighborhood Pilgrimage," *Spirituality and Health*, January 6, 2012, <https://spiritualityhealth.com/blogs/spirituality-health/2012/01/07/celebrant-institute-deepen-your-practice-neighborhood-pilgrimage>.

³⁸³ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 186.

³⁸⁴ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 61.

Kujawa-Holbrook notes that pilgrimage is most essentially about being in a liminal space, a space that calls us into being with ourselves, community, and God.

Pilgrimage concepts of liminality, the experience of being “in between” worlds, and *communitas* are often primary models. The pilgrim separates from her previous way of life but is in a transitional phase and has not reached a stage of integration of that experience...For spiritual people, liminal experience is often interpreted as the presence of the Divine or a call from God.³⁸⁵

Kujawa-Holbrook continues,

The word pilgrimage derives from the Latin *peregrinus*, meaning ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner.’ On some level, pilgrimage always connotes a life-changing journey. For some, *pilgrimage* means to journey to a place where holiness is apparent or where some kind of divine and human encounter took place. Some describe the experience as a search for spiritual depth or moral significance. Others are on a search for a path toward freedom and peace. Some are directed toward a specific destination—such as dwelling place of a saint, or a holy place that evokes prayer and reflection, or the site of a significant life event. For others, the passage is symbolic of the journey of a soul to God and primarily an inward experience of alternative sacred geography. Still others describe pilgrimage as a threshold experience that points to a new reality or a process of inner transformation.³⁸⁶

How do we name our pilgrim experiences? Kujawa-Holbrook suggest we do it through liminality and *communitas*: “Liminality and *communitas* gives us a language for the important internal and external dynamics inherent in all pilgrimage experiences...the sacred art of pilgrimage transcends religious, national, cultural and linguistic boundaries.”³⁸⁷ She goes on, “*Communitas* refers to the experience of oneness that is experienced by participants in shared rituals...the experience of *communitas* sustains pilgrims as they traverse through the physical discomfort as well as the psychological and spiritual pain so often part of liminal experiences.”³⁸⁸

³⁸⁵ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 5.

³⁸⁶ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 4–5.

³⁸⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 7.

³⁸⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 5.

My spiritual journey is intricately intertwined with my athletic journey. To separate the two would be like trying to separate body and soul, and yet I have lived with a sense of being fragmented in theological education because there sports was not a valued space for theological reflections.

In the following, you will read how my athletic formation shaped and formed my spiritual formation. You will read of the lessons I learned about competition, community, communion, compassion, and care; and lessons of life and how I entered very sacred spaces of being. It is in the merging of the two, athletics and spirituality, that I find my authentic self. Flow has been an essential part of my athletic and spiritual being. It is the place where energies align, cosmologies meet and awarenesses are opened. I can see all aspects of myself through this special union: my queerness, my blackness, my woman-ness, my lust and zeal for beauty, my family, and my unwillingness to quiet the voices within me that scream to be heard. “Identity is a lifelong vocation. It is a ceaseless process. We rework our identities as we traverse seasons of life. It is also intimately relational and communal. There is an aspect of each of us in each significant past and present relationship and experience. The tapestry of life contributes to our respective identities.”³⁸⁹ It is a funny thing: I never thought sports and spirituality go together, but lo and behold they are the two major pillars in my life.

The Flow

There was one notable time I was completely out of my flow. I was young, maybe a freshman, and we played on the east coast. I do not remember the school now. We were unaccustomed to playing on the east coast which plays a different kind of game, gritty and rough. The opposing point guard was playing rough with me, pushing, shoving, playing me really close. I lost my

³⁸⁹ Donald M. Chinula, *Building Kings Beloved Community: Foundations for Pastoral Care and Counseling with the Oppressed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 29.

cool, not accustomed to this rough play and not yet equipped with the mental aspects of the game. I let her get to me. At half court, I stopped, put the ball on my left hip and pushed her off me. It was not discreet. It was not fair play and it was highly inappropriate. I got a technical foul and was ejected from the game. It was a hard lesson for me as a young player with lots of potential. To be so taken out of my flow that I reacted in an untimely and inappropriate manner taught me a lot about basketball and life. It also was the catalyst for working on the mental aspects of the game as well as the physical. My opponent that night got the best of me, and from that point on I vowed never to let it happen again. My actions were fodder for the women's basketball world and every time we played on the east coast thereafter, I was reminded, as was everyone, of my actions.

That's the thing about flow. It works wonderfully when you are in it. But once you are out of the place of unity or oneness, everything seems to fall apart. It is a tactic of the other team to remove the opposing players from their flow. Every athlete knows the importance of flow and rhythm. Flow is the ultimate metaphor for life. It is when we are grounded in our being and focused on the success of our own actions and the actions of others. But it can also be thwarted through deliberate decentering. This decentering happens within and outside of sports. This happens in every arena of our lives. The opposing point guard had a good reason to get me out of my flow. In my zone I was powerful. My team followed me and the energy I possessed. I was leading my team toward victory. When the point guard was able to distract me from my ultimate goal and purpose, not only did I lose focus, my whole team did. While it is entirely possible to enter the flow through individual sports and participation, I approach flow through the lens of team. In a sport like basketball, we cannot flow **separately. It** takes a team, a community, to see it through.

It was my senior year. Before big games I was deeply aware that getting in my flow would be critical for me as the leader of the team. To get myself ready I listened to music. Music has always been a space where I have encountered the divine and been able to ground myself. It always happened long before the game. This was an intentional practice, as it allowed me to empty myself of thoughts that would impede me from reaching my ultimate potential. Depending upon the focus and mood I needed to enter dictated the kind of music I listened to. Sometimes it was upbeat, something with lots of rhythm and heavy bass, at other times it was something soft and gentle. During that time, earbuds were not a thing, so I had the stereo on full blast, bass booming, speakers visibly moving from the rhythms. Before entering the arena for warmups, I engaged in body relaxation techniques I had learned from my coach. I then entered a space of contemplation where I visualized myself making baskets and assisting my team in success. The music helped me get into this space as it allowed me to clear my mind of all the noise and focus on the task at hand. I was prepping myself for flow. This was part of my pre-game ritual.

Upon arriving in the arena, I engaged my five senses. For home games, the smell of E.A. Diddle arena moved within my nose and triggered memories of past successes. It also helped me dream of future successes both on and off the court. The seats were empty. The arena was silent. It was just me and my thoughts. As was my ritual, I walked the entire floor slowly and intentionally. I thought about legacy and the triumphant women and men who have gone before me. With each intentional step across the court I smelled the freshly swept floors with a hint of Pine Sol and metal. It was a beautiful smell that reminded me of home. It grounded me. I gazed at the banners that hung high in the rafters of retired players jerseys, one of which is my father's, and the banners of past successes of the WKU athletics program, tying me to the past and

imagining what my role and responsibility in the present was. I let my eyes roll over the empty benches that would soon fill with two teams eager for victory.

Though the gym was quiet, I could hear in my mind the first roars of the crowd when our team would emerge from the tunnel. A vacuum of sound, that in this moment of quiet, I could hear. Striding toward the locker room, I would touch red padding at the base of the goal as if to connect with it. And taste? Well, I would like to think that the excretions that fired from the back of my mouth were born of anticipation and excitement about what lie ahead. I walked back to the locker room. The walk was slow and mindful. I knew the next time I would be leaving the locker room it would be for the game with all the energy present in that moment. But now was a time for me to have my space and time for quiet contemplation. The room was empty. I sat in front of my locker. I smelled the cleanliness of the room. I saw the freshly vacuumed carpet. I removed my shoes and felt that carpet beneath my toes. I always took a deep breath and allowed the space and the energy of the room to speak to me. I knew it would be crowded with athletic trainers, coaches, and players, so having the space to myself was something I always treasured before games.

The time I had to myself was normally about an hour before others began entering the locker room. I would stretch, listen to my music on at full blast, and sit with my thoughts. I began visualizations and moved my body in ways I would on the court. As the room filled, our coach gathered us together in a huddle for a pre-game pep talk and game plan. He motivated us to do our best, to keep our heads, and remain focused on our goal—success. As a team, we never prayed together. Instead we focused our attention and energy toward the success of the other. We gathered ourselves to a collective consciousness which allowed us to flow together. Coach led us through breathing techniques and visualizations before we had our last huddle before entering

the tunnel for the game. It was beautiful and something I have treasured and carried with me along this journey.

In the second half of that game we were down by ten and decided we needed to make a shift in tactics as the opposing team was dominating us in every way. The fans were screaming, the cheerleaders were in an uproar, flipping and dancing and in a frenzy of their own. A win was still within reach. Coach decided to run a zone we had practiced that week. It was called the mad-dog Defense. A signature of the WKU women's basketball team was *the* place of flow. It not only signaled to each team member and coach, but the entire home arena crowd, that the "energy" was about to change. When our coach signaled, with crossed arms high above his head, that we were to get into the mad-dog defense, the energy within myself caught fire with the energy of my four other teammates and with the entire crowd. I was the mad dog. The defense was a 1-2-2 three-quarter court zone designed to disrupt our opponents, and to provide us an opportunity to flow together—score. I was the one at the top of the zone defense and my energy and flow were to dictate and signal to the others the tempo at which we were to run the trapping zone defense.

I corralled the opposing guards into a particular zone on the floor and suddenly, with a great intensity, a teammate would charge in with feet moving and hands waving to enclose the opponent into a snare of sorts. It was like herding cattle into one place or like gnats swarming their prey. All five of us were tethered to the movements of the other using our instincts that at times seemed telepathic. It was a place of oneness. Said another way, we were "in the zone." We were linked collectively with everything and everyone in the arena. There was an electric energy that is hard to describe. In a moment I felt in control, powerful, and in sync with my teammates. While there were many experiences of oneness with my teammates, it was during this time that I

felt the most at one. It was as if we were breathing the same breath, all aware of our ultimate goal. For me, such premeditated flow made room for the non-liminal space of flow to happen *in* the game. Other times, the experience of flow was completely random, something that happened unbeknownst to me. At those times, it was a feeling of otherworldliness: the basket seemed so large I could not miss, or I could see plays and movements happening two or three steps ahead. The sense of flow I felt at those times were like floating. The crowd roared, players were moving, I was calling plays and making passes, but it was like having an out-of-body experience. Things just clicked at a level that is very difficult to describe.

The results often caused a steal, or intercepted pass, that led us to converting a breakaway basket. The other guard was on the other end of an alley-oop I lofted near the rim for an easy score. This fueled a frenzy among the crowd; they erupted with roars of excitement. There was a sea of red towels waving. It was as if the towels themselves were generating a wind that lifted everything in the arena. That wind generated a flow in which we all, players and spectators, became caught up, something analogous to the “mighty rushing wind” of the Pentecost Spirit. Caught up in this spirit, this energy, this flow, after we scored a basket, we again set the mad-dog defense and each time the flow, energy, spirit would be elevated, igniting higher levels of frenzy. With every play the energy rose higher and higher. The crowd roared with such excitement, there seemed to be a collective hum in the arena. It was as if there were no individual sounds, only one. I remember my heart beating steadily as I connected to the hum of the crowd and the energy of my teammates. There was a certain synergy that took place while running this defensive zone.

As the mad-dog of this defense, I was the literal leader. There was so much pressure on my shoulders that I had to dig deep inside of myself to center and focus. In this way, I gathered myself in a moment of stillness and collective consciousness to allow myself to be open to the

possibility and transformative power of flow. I communicated with my teammates through looks and gestures. While it is typically vital to communicate verbally on the floor, this time we did not need it: it seemed we shared a single brain. This is flow. Being so connected with one another and our coach, we won the game. We were successful. It was a sweet victory. Had I not had the experience of being knocked out of my zone when I was a freshman, I would not have known how important it was to stay grounded and open. I learned so much from my freshman year to senior year about being open to receive Spirit as it moves. Naturally, I did not know it was Spirit—fully—back then. I now think of past events with so much more understanding.

When I was the head basketball coach at the University of Dayton, I would often sneak off to the chapel and lie on my back alone to connect to that spirit. There was a sacredness for me there. I was able to connect to God and allow space for God to connect to me. It was in that space that I entered into intentional preparation for flow. I remember feelings of detachment, being in the present, and floating. Lying on my back, I could feel the cool of the chapel floor, the smell of the oak pews, and even with eyes closed, the light coming in through one of the stained-glass windows. I took time to check in with my body. I relaxed my muscles in succession and took in deep breaths with every relaxed muscle. It was as if I was breathing out the tension and stress and creating space to be filled with whatever Spirit had for me. Again, I was using techniques I had gleaned during my time as a player. I had the space to think about what I would say to the young women in my pre-game talk before the game. I was brought to the times when I was a player and what it took for me to get into the flow. I remember having feelings of peace and relief whenever I rested in the chapel. I was able to go over plays, our offenses and defenses, as well as each player's role. I was able to anticipate the moves of the other team and how they would stack up against my players. In the chapel, I got clear. It was my ritual.

I would arrive to the UD arena early, similar to my practice as a player. Walking through the doors I took deep breaths and steadied myself. While I remembered the pressure of being a player, there was a different, more intense, pressure as a coach. There were certainly different stressors, as I was no longer trying to get only myself in the flow. I was responsible for creating the space to allow the women to get into their own flow. It was a different practice being a conduit of flow. I realized I could only help the young women if I too was grounded. And so, I did all the things I had done as a player to ground myself. I walked to the locker room as I had done so many times before. It was quiet. I was able to write on the board and set the intention of room before everyone gathered together. I had my speaking points in my head, and I breathed.

As the room filled, my players all engaged in their own rituals, getting themselves together for the contest at hand. Game time was always exciting, as we were able to test ourselves to our maximum capacity. It was a time to see what we were made of and how much we were willing to communicate and connect with one another. I called the team into a huddle and began leading them through a breathing technique I had learned as a player at WKU. Then I gave them the head coach pep talk. We went over game plans and discussed our options. We gathered together for our last huddle before it was time to hit the tunnel and we bowed our heads in prayer. While we did not pray at WKU, it was important to me to lead my players through this particular practice as it had been so formative to me. Though at a Catholic school, I coached women of different beliefs and they prayed to their Ultimate Concern. It was beautiful and unifying.

We left the tunnel. I hit the bench and the game began. We were playing the number three seed and it appeared they had our number. They were outscoring us as the game went on. We were down three at the half. In the locker room, I remember having a conversation with the

team about purpose and confidence. It was a talk that also inspired them to put more points on the board, for we were better than we were playing. We did a quick mind-body exercise after going over plays and then it was time to hit the floor again. We were able to make a quick turnaround and began leading late in the second half. The game went back and forth for what seemed like five hours. The opposing team was in the lead. There was a moment I locked eyes with my best player. In that moment she and I were thinking the same thing as we were both operating in flow. We were connected with the same energy. In that moment, I called the mad-dog defense and she was the mad-dog. It was in that moment I saw my player lead with an instinctive action and surrender that could lead the team to an improbable victory. She was magnetic and a performer. She hit the floor with two hands at half court to signal to her teammates and the crowd that we would not be denied. The fans erupted. Again, there was a moment of oneness. Everyone in UD arena was on the same page. We were all rooting for a victory. We were all invested in what was happening on the court. In that moment we *all* flowed, breathing the same breath. It was the same experience as when I was a player. There was a kinetic energy in the place. It was a moment of sheer ecstasy.

The Gym and JC

As the daughter of a National Basketball Association veteran, a Division I men's basketball coach, and an assistant coach for the 1996 Olympic team, one can easily deduce that he was the most influential in the development of my basketball skills and self. But over the years and as a result of the same process of digging deeper toward God, I also discovered a new root, a new nurturing, empowering influence. It was not my grandmother Lucy, whom I easily name as my most profound spiritual teacher, not my grandmother Harriet, to whom my womanist/feminist shaping can be most directly tied, and not my mother, despite all the ways in

which she made sure I was loved, cared for, and well-rounded. This is the value of deep reflection inherent in autoethnography as well as with a God that can be known and unknown simultaneously: surprises.

My grandfather J.C. Penick was a gentle man. Impeccably clean, from his shoes to his car, always neat, always kind. It seems improbable to call a World War II veteran gentle and kind, but that was exactly who he was. Yet, like a veteran he was courageous and unflinching in his commitment to God and to others. He and my grandmother Harriett had an unconventional marriage for their time. She was the breadwinner and carried out the label in the traditional way. That meant she “ruled the roost.” Non-traditionally, he was the one who nurtured, did the household chores, including washing dishes after every meal. And he swept. Oh my, *how* he swept.

In the summer, I would often go to work with him. I thought he had the best job in the world. I thought he was the most important and smartest man I knew. He had a huge ring of keys, as he was the janitor at my school. He would have the whole place to himself and most importantly, gave the space to me. He would open the gym, gather a rack of basketballs, and leave me the entire gymnasium. Moreover, the floor glistened. It was the best floor I had ever seen. And it was all mine. My grandfather mopped and waxed that floor with an old rag mop and pail. He then buffed and shined it by hand. He was able to give me the most meaningful and most treasured gift a girl like me could have. I can see him now looking back while standing at the door to go about cleaning the rest of the school. I was dribbling the length of the floor, making moves and the announcer in my head would say, “Tie score here at Taylor County middle school, 5 seconds remaining the ball is inbound—wait, Haskins steals the ball, goes the length of the floor—5-4-3-2, she stops, she pops, she scores—the Cardinals win, they win, they

win!” Simultaneously I feel the energy surge, I hear the crowd roar...and my grandfather smiles and walks out the door. Smiling proudly at the floor he mopped and waxed, and at his pigtailed, tomboy granddaughter. I would go on to hit some game-winning shots and assist in quite a few victories. I was successful, in part, because I practiced the mental imagery, the feeling, so many times. I started that practice as a child, in a gym alone, with a rack of basketballs, and a floor waxed just for me.

If visiting the gym with my grandpa was a pilgrimage for me at that age, the transition of a second stage of that pilgrimage would last for many years. Kujawa-Holbrook has this to say about the transition phase of pilgrimage: “the pilgrim has separated from life as she used to know it and begins reflective practice of making meaning from these new experiences. This is the point in the journey where the pilgrim enters a liminal stage...[with] feelings of disorientation or ambiguity.”³⁹⁰ I have been in and out of this liminal space, connecting and disconnecting from my life of sports. At last, I have found that they should not, cannot, be separated. They should be joined. For this reason, *Queer and Queering: A Womanist Spirituality of Sports* for me is more than a title: it has been, and still is, a way of living, moving, and being in the world.

Boys and Girls

When I was young, I was not much interested in boys unless I was trying to beat them in a game or size them up as a good teammate on the court. Boys were my buddies and I never saw them as much more than that. Even as some of the girls became interested in whether boys were cute, or funny, or got giggly around them, that never happened for me. I saw myself more like boys than girls. I was more aligned with their way of thinking and participating in the world. It

³⁹⁰ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 59.

was beyond me why, at recess, most girls huddled together to keep from sweating and were chatting about things in which I had absolutely no interest.

To sweat and participate with the boys playing some version of ball—and beating them at their own game,— was the ultimate for me. My two best friends were the quarterbacks of the grade school football team and together we decided that I would be a wide receiver. Therefore, recess was for working on my routes. I was so excited to get home and tell my mother I would be trying out for the football team. I could not wait to put on the pads, helmet, and cleats. *“You acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one.*”³⁹¹

My mother put an abrupt stop to that dream. She was unequivocal that being a wide receiver on the football team was neither in my near nor distant future. I was devastated. To be fair, I imagine she recalled vividly the time in second grade living in Tempe, Arizona, of having to be called to the neighborhood boy’s house to find me lying on my back beside a palm tree with thorns over my eye and sticking in my knee. I had a mild concussion, but all I could say was, “Did I hold on to the ball? Was it a touchdown?” The palm tree was the endzone and I wanted to know if I had scored. I suppose my mom thought that would cure me of the football dream, only for it to resurface in seventh grade. This time, she put a definite end to it. I was a version of queer and womanish in behavior by second grade. Later, I would exhibit and embody other queer and womanish behaviors. Womanish as a “woman who loves other women, sexually,” and Queer as an identity, rather than only as curious, strange, odd, or bizarre.

³⁹¹ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, xi.

I was different from most girls my age and I did not even know why. I thought the girls were the strange ones, not me. I suppose that healthy self-esteem never has dissipated and neither has my ability to relate and be with the guys either. I later discovered I liked girls too, but not to be giddy with. I liked girls like the boys liked girls. Instinctively I knew that was something to keep secret. This secret (albeit open secret to many) I ~~only~~ spoke to the world **only** finally during my years in seminary. I was forty-five years old.

Queering Camp

I was accustomed at an early to being the *only*. The only girl, the only Black person, the only Queer, or the *only* of all three at once. The earliest memory of this as it relates to sports and spirituality was of being the only girl at an all-boys basketball camp in Prescott, Arizona in the early 1970s. It was the first time I experienced sexism. In the early '70s, Title IX³⁹² was a law enacted that guaranteed equal rights for women. Athletics was one arena to which it applied. As with any mandated law, there were what appeared to be crafty ways to try to circumvent it—rather than to follow it. At any rate, at this young age, I was well advanced in basketball skills. Back then, athletic or outdoorsy girls were labeled “tomboys.” For young athletes who showed outstanding skill, attending various basketball camps throughout the summer was common practice.

Girls camps were nonexistent. We had the “option” either to compete with the boys or not compete at all. Naturally, my father never considered the fact there were not camps for girls until his oldest daughter had nowhere to play. “Hold on, stop everything! My daughter doesn’t have anywhere to play! The world must be changed!” Due the lack of girl participants for the

³⁹² “Title IX and Sex Discrimination,” Policy Guidance, September 25, 2018.

summer, I had to do the next best thing. I went to camp as the only girl among four hundred boys for an entire week. I was ecstatic.

As the only and first at this Arizona basketball camp, there were no considerations or concessions made to ensure this was a good experience for me. Though there were laws on the books, not enough men had daughters who wanted to play a sport for the laws to matter. At any rate, it was obvious that some viewed my (queer) presence at the camp with suspicion and prejudice—until of course I could prove my skills. It was obvious that adjustments would need to be made and business as usual would no longer suffice. For example, the idea of staying with the boys in the dormitory—the absolute best part of camp—was not an option. I had to stay in a hotel with my mom and sister. This was not the camp experience I wanted. No longer would “shirts” and “skins” be an acceptable way to differentiate between two teams. And the simple act of going to the bathroom was always a traumatic experience. The doors were always locked, so it was a big ordeal that involved walkie talkies, keys, and custodians. The experience is comical now, but for a young girl, it was all quite overwhelming. *“Traditionally capable, as in: ‘Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘it wouldn’t be the first time.’”*

I was good and I knew that I was better than most, if not all, of the boys at camp in my age group. As a result, my skill level was equal to that of the junior high boys. I was moved up to play with the older group of boys, who were much stronger and taller than I was. But this became a distressing reality when I discovered that perhaps it was not only because of my advanced skill that I was chosen to compete in a group beyond my age. Yes, the promotion was to improve my skills, but there was a greater truth at the heart of the matter: perhaps failing would teach me a lesson. As in the relationship between Christian theology and spirituality, we

understand that two things can be true at once. While theology has historically and traditionally been privileged, it is also true that Christian spirituality has a long and rich historic tradition. Perhaps its undervaluing, among many reasons, could be its suppression. The voices and experience of Christian spirituality, like me in this story, have been muffled and/or not given the prominence in studies in the same ways as theology has. And yet my spirituality caused me to question and problematize this system which felt oppressive. I used my (as yet unnamed) womanist spirituality to obtain a deeper meaning of connection, even at nine.

The reason for the advancement was primarily to keep the boys in my age group from being upset about getting beat and/or outshone by a girl. The following themes would begin a soundtrack that would continue to play for the rest of my life. 1) You have to be better than they are; 2) They (in this instance, boys) do not really want you to succeed, or at least not at their expense; 3) People will set you up for failure under the guise of doing something good for you; and 4) When you are good or excel at what you do, becoming a threat to those in power and some of your peers can be lonely and isolating. The cost one pays for queering historical, traditional systems is great.

I befriended one of the boys on my team who was an outlier as well. He was the heaviest kid in camp picked on for being the “the fat kid.” His name was Josh. I convinced Josh that he and I could equally share success if he would set a screen to delay my defenders and create enough time for me to shoot my jump shot against the much larger and stronger boys. He and I needed a plan and it worked like a charm. Josh and I would go on to be one of the best tandems in camp, collecting more than one trophy at the end of the week. The set-up for my advancement and/or failure of pairing me with boys well beyond my age and size was thwarted by me joining up with another outlier.

The black girl and the heavy kid became fast friends as we found a way to win through our newly formed alliance. We made quite the tandem. In the end, it was the dynamic duo that would beat the pants off the privileged ones. The others soon recognized they could not beat us, and eventually wanted to join us. Josh and I experienced mutuality. We engaged in communion with one another through our solidarity. We were both on the margins of camp, felt singled out for our differences, and both wanted to be in relationship with the other boys. Carter Heyward posits,

The experience of mutuality can strengthen us also to live prophetically as enablers of mutuality. To be in solidarity with those who are not standing with us, to advocate the well-being of those who do not like us, to accept as potential friends those who reject us—this unconditional love, with roots in compassion, is an open invitation into right relation.³⁹³

Relational intimacy is vital to right relationships and the flourishing that brings about the common good of human existence and experience. Josh and I shared such intimacy.

I enacted this intimacy at a tender age, not a romantic intimacy, rather, an intimacy of solidarity. Josh and I participated in an incarnational mutuality about which Heyward writes,

The public shape of our compassion is solidarity, standing with those who suffer most severely the effects of abusive power relations. We do not put ourselves above them or beneath them. We do not tell them what's best for them, nor do we expect them to know what's best for us. We stand with them in mutual relations, trusting that each has something valuable to contribute to all and that, in mutual relation, their well-being and ours are inextricably linked.³⁹⁴

Relationships are integral to the identity and existence of self and the reality we co-create with God. This is about communing to bring about the full flourishing of humanity and earth. I tasted *communitas* with Josh, specifically, and the other boys, eventually. This would run as a common

³⁹³ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and Love of God*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 142.

³⁹⁴ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 141–42.

theme throughout my entire life. Making space for myself and for others with the established boys club, enjoying the company and playing with the boys, befriending the boys and, if I am honest, relishing in beating the boys. My womanist bones took shape.

Insomuch as spirituality is “a way of life embedded in a tradition and woven together with relationships with [divine energy], self, neighbor, community and the created world,”³⁹⁵ deepening our conception of communion in terms of how we mediate our spirituality is integral for our transformation. When we engage communion from the margins, we open ourselves to the grounded creative energy of the divine source. As Nakashima Brock reflects,

Good is grounded in our deep awareness of others, our willingness to participate in mutual transformation, the expansions of quality, the increase of meaning that comes from increasing connectedness, and the deepening of communion among all who participate in relationship.³⁹⁶

This was the early spiritual formation of a queer and queering womanist coming into being as the importance of mutual transformation shaped her.

QWEST Journeys

Pilgrimage to Israel

Upon graduating from college and completing my collegiate basketball career in 1987, the Women’s National Basketball Association did not exist. The only option for women then was to join a team in another country. The teams overseas were limited to two American players and I another player set off to join a team in Tel Aviv, Israel. While it was considered a honor to have this opportunity, I foolishly did not take it as seriously as one should. At twenty years old, I was

³⁹⁵ Claire E. Wolfteich, “Spirituality,” in *The Wiley Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 331.

³⁹⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journey of the Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 48–49.

not prepared, athletically or spiritually, for my first international experience, and it did not go well, or at least as I had expected.

The other player from Tennessee and I, from Kentucky, met in New York City to get our passports. It was certainly a different time back then. We joined a very long line of people at the Greater New York Federal Building on Hudson. I was awed by so many people and of every hue and language. It took hours to move two steps.

My dad met us to help us navigate the process and to be with me as I left the country for the first time. After securing our credentials, we set off for our first international flight. I was nervous and unsure. The people assembled at the gate before boarding did not look like anybody I had seen before in Kentucky and they most certainly did not have a Southern accent. They had accents I had never heard before. And yet, there was some sense that though we were unfamiliar with one another, we were in it together. Not many white faces were present—mostly, my fellow passengers were olive-skinned people and many adorned with religious symbols and dress that were unfamiliar to me.

My most vivid memory however, involved my father. I was at the pay phone talking and crying with my mother. I look toward where my dad was sitting, and I hear him talking loudly and see him gesturing wildly. I freeze and tell my mother through my tears I have to go and get dad. Now I understand, retrospectively, that my father was looking to make connections with someone to look out for me, but in the moment I was humiliated. He was loudly asking this gentleman, “Do you speak English,” while moving his hands as if to make sign language, which he does not know. I was mortified.

The gentleman was gracious and as I drew nearer to them, I saw the fellow half smile and say, “Yes, I do, and I will be sure to keep an eye on your daughter on the flight.” There it is, my

father and I together, encountering a majority of folks not of our religion or culture, and yet finding a connection of care. I am glad the gentleman was gentle in light of my father's ignorance. It was a lesson I would carry with me: sometimes, people make fools of themselves out of profound not knowing, and a gentle response can be a gift.

Before I left for Tel Aviv, I was very nervous about that part of the world. All I knew at that time was what was on the news. Our neighbors, the Shachmans, invited me over for dinner and gave me a different view of Israel. They went there every year on pilgrimage and even offered one of their friends in Tel Aviv as a contact for me while I was there. That friend had me over for dinner shortly after I arrived. The deep meaning of hospitality from Jewish neighbors in the United States and hospitality from a Jewish friend in Israel has always stayed with me. And it centered around table fellowship, to boot. This was something that resonated deeply with me. Lesson: gathering around the table with people from a different religion can be deeply meaningful and can also resonate deeply with all people, near and far.

It was significant that I had that evening of conversation and hospitality with the Shachmans before I left, because when we stepped off the plane in Tel Aviv, there were military people with machine guns walking about. I was not in Kentucky any longer—not that Kentucky folks did not have high powered rifles: they simply did not carry them out in the open.

I was in the worst physical shape of my life. I had not prepared one moment for the rigors of playing professionally, and it showed. So much so, I got cut from the team. I had never been cut from anything. I was humiliated and knew I'd let a lot of people down, including myself. I was berated by the coaches and personnel. They had invested in me and I did not produce. The return ticket was not flexible, and I had to wait two weeks before I could return home. Enter my spiritual journey intersecting with my sports: failure.

I had lots of time on my hands. I began to explore. Between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, I visited a monastery. I cannot recall which it was, but they made wine and I marveled at this very distinct way of being Christian. Now I can name that I felt a lure toward it, but back then I was just a visitor, or so I thought. Later, I would visit one of the team members' homes in what is now Palestine, and we gathered for dinner. It was the first time I had partaken in a meal where nothing served was remotely familiar. Grape-leaf-wrapped food. Falafel. Hummus. I had never eaten those things before and yet, here I was at yet another table being offered hospitality and communion – community. Lesson: sometimes the elements, food, and people at a table are not familiar, and even of a different religion, yet communion and community happen anyway.

The next day that same teammate took me to Old Jerusalem, The Old City. We visited the Dome of the Rock.

Today, the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa are considered the holiest sites in Jerusalem for Muslims, which is a source of considerable tension—the Dome of the Rock is built at the center of the Temple Mount, the site of the Jewish Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The holiest site for Jews is the Foundation Stone. Because Jewish prayers are forbidden on the Temple Mount, the tradition developed of praying at the Western Wall, as the point closest to the Foundation Stone.³⁹⁷

For the first time I covered my head, kneeled, and prayed. We visited the Western Wall, the “Wailing Wall,” and I put into a crack between the huge stones a written prayer, later to discover that was a novel thing to be able to do as a woman. Women are not allowed to pray at the wall, something that had never even occurred to me as a possibility. This was truly a different land.

The remnant of the Temple, the Western Wall (or Wailing Wall) is the most sacred place in Judaism and the destination for Jewish pilgrims from Israel and around the world. While they stand in prayer at the wall, they express their sorrow at the loss of the Temple and draw strength from the fact that the stones that remain are a sign that God has not abandoned the Jewish people. Pilgrims to the wall will slip written prayers into the cracks

³⁹⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 32.

between the stones, where they are absorbed into the prayers of those who came centuries before.³⁹⁸

Kujawa-Holbrook notes, “In a similar way the town of Bethlehem on the West Bank, an important pilgrimage destination across the Abrahamic faiths, also serves as a challenge to interreligious tolerance. It is the site of Rachel’s tomb, the birth of Jesus, and the place where Muhammad rested to pray on his night journey to Jerusalem from Mecca.”³⁹⁹ Visiting these sites was monumental for me. I had never been in such holy places. The feelings of lure, belonging, and adventure were very much present. I was in a foreign land, worshipping, in a manner of speaking, with people from different faiths. My eyes were opened, and I was able to see God in a much deeper and bigger light. From that experience, I was able to see humanity in a different light as well. We are all called to connection—*communitas*. We are lured into a community of deep connection with one another, the sacred, and the earth. I found myself in the matrix of my formational spiritual learning and new experiences. To say I was moved is an understatement.

We also visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which, according to legend, is where, while in Palestine, Helena (mother of Constantine, Roman Emperor 312 CE), found the remains of the True Cross, again, according to legend, the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. Thus began the tradition of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land.⁴⁰⁰

This experience was more than my twenty-year-old self could handle. While I was mesmerized by all that I had seen, in my mind, I was just a tourist, and this was good to see. “The pilgrimage differs from tourist trips or sightseeing expeditions...the destination of the

³⁹⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 17.

³⁹⁹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 32.

⁴⁰⁰ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 21.

pilgrim is not a place of relaxation or entertainment; it is not for cultural exploration per se. A pilgrim's goal is transformation that requires rigorous and intentional psychological and spiritual work, often in the context of arduous travel experiences."⁴⁰¹

The reality was I had just been cut from a professional basketball team, I had just disappointed so many people, and I had to return to face them. I had failed. I was in the process of pain and struggle as the pilgrim's journey denotes. I was ashamed, embarrassed, and angry. I did not know at the time how important those feelings were on my journey. I have had to carry those feelings with me, knowing I would never play basketball again. And yet I was in the midst of spiritual transformation brought about by travels that were the result of being an athlete. I am still in awe at the intersection of sports and spirituality in my life. It is truly amazing. Had I not been in Tel Aviv for basketball and gotten cut, I may have never had the opportunity to experience the holy places I did. Kujawa-Kujawa-Holbrook notes,

Key characteristics of the inward journey are pain and struggle...Throughout history, pilgrimages have been about navigating rough terrain in both the outward and inward journeys. The need for physical endurance brings a heightened awareness to the pilgrim that assist her in the process of self-discovery and reinforces the importance of the journey.⁴⁰²

She continues,

Rather than a glorification of needless suffering, the emphasis on suffering in the pilgrimage tradition is more about the recognition that we all suffer, and because of those experiences, we can become more compassionate toward the suffering of others, as well as the suffering of the world.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 55.

⁴⁰² Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 62.

⁴⁰³ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 62–63.

I was a failure and my ego could not hold that. French existentialist Gabriel Marcel wrote in *The Mystery of Being*, “All life holds within itself a promise of resurrection.”⁴⁰⁴ And as if in response Kujawa-Holbrook concludes, “Healing and transformation occur...with deep reflection on these inner images, despite the strain, and emerge with a new state of consciousness...through confrontation and struggle...the pilgrim emerges transformed and renewed.”⁴⁰⁵

My journey had only begun, here, the place where I thought it had definitely ended. My basketball career was over, and I had no idea who I was outside of that label. My life from this point would always be pointing toward all that I had experienced in Israel. I had no idea how profound that experience would be for my future.

Pilgrimage to France and Italy, 1st Half

The first time I went on a pilgrimage (though I did not know to call it that then) I was the assistant basketball coach at the University of Arizona. In the Summer of 1983, we traveled to France and Italy to play games. The impetus for teams going to play during the summer in a different part of the world was to foster unity and oneness among the team, to hone the team’s skill set to meet adversity, depend on one another outside of the comforts of home and hopefully, triumph together. This was fostered by not only playing and practicing, but also by immersing ourselves in a different culture and seeing sights together.

One of my responsibilities was to consider ways to make the trip meaningful beyond basketball. To the delight of the players, we had planned many excursions, and yet it was hard for them to understand why we “had” to go to Louvre in Paris or the Guggenheim in Venice. They did not grasp the importance of the Eiffel tower and riding in gondolas in Venetian canals,

⁴⁰⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (London: Horvill Press, 1950), 185.

⁴⁰⁵ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 58.

though both are exquisite, as they were a group of eighteen to twenty-one -year-old basketball players. The coaching staff had to trust that a “third stage of pilgrimage, *incorporation*, where the pilgrim integrates new learning and new ways of being into her life and journey home”⁴⁰⁶ would take root at some point in their lives. For as Kujawa-Holbrook notes, “For some...it takes a long time to fully realize the implications of their inward journey.”⁴⁰⁷ We were all there for business, but it was my job to expose them to culture and beauty. I took it as my personal mission to expose the girls to transformative things. During that time, I was moved in ways I could not comprehend. I was there to work, not play, as it were. I thought I was doing the girls a service by exposing them to museums and other monumental sights. I was moved by the beauty and reverence of those spaces. I had an experience with God I had long since forgotten until this very moment.

I saw God in every piece of art; every beautiful Parisian and Italian body. Seeing the beauty of the structures and hearing the wind blow through the buildings on the gondola ride was something to behold. The way the light shone on the water was like watching God create in the same space. I was deeply moved. I would not have characterized this experience as spiritual had it not been for the tears that ran down my face and the smile that leapt in my heart. God was everywhere and in everything. Again, this was an intersection of sports and spirituality for me. I was there to lead my team, and in the midst of doing work, I saw God. Sports has been the vehicle for my spirituality in so many ways, either by opening doors or through the many contemplative and spiritual practices I have been exposed to as a member of a team. These were principles I brought with me to my assistant coaching job.

⁴⁰⁶ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 59.

⁴⁰⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 59.

Chapel Beauty

During my first year as the Head Basketball Coach of the University of Dayton in 1994, I was sidelined and on bed rest for eight weeks after surgery at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. For the first time, I became aware of my own mortality. I began to ponder questions such as: What is my purpose? Am I living my best life? Is coaching basketball to be my life's work? The spiritual practice I had learned was to ask questions, even when there appeared to be no answers—something I had learned at college. Upon returning to work at the University of Dayton, a Catholic university, as I noted before I would often steal away to the chapel to lie on my back and gaze at the beauty of the stained-glass windows, the candles burning, the intricately carved wood, and the brilliant light that shone in. In that place, I was home. But it was a home I had never felt before and yet had experienced many times over—beauty. Beauty was my home.

It was there that I felt comforted and secure by simply gazing at beauty. Being held in the chapel by beauty, being whispered to by beauty, and being filled by beauty was a new experience within the structure of a church. I had experienced these feeling before, but always out in nature. This time beauty whispered to me inside the church. Thus, I began the spiritual practice I still employ, of gazing at churches. I have been known randomly to go into churches or search towns for their churches, just to gaze at their beauty. I fell in love with the multiplicity of how beauty is expressed by churches' architecture. "For some...the sacred is most easily experienced in nature...while others gravitate to the holiness of temples, shrines, churches, and other holy places...others see the Divine in the faces of people and in the experience of community."⁴⁰⁸

Since my time in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, I have found myself drawn to the structures of holy places. For me those holy places are another conduit of my experiences with and of God.

⁴⁰⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 65.

I am drawn to places of communion and community. Thanks to pilgrimage, I feel myself drawn to the depth of one's soul. I reflect on my own mortality and participation in the circle of life. For me, gazing at churches is recognition of the interconnectedness of all things—in beauty. For in beauty we are created, nurtured, and the most alive. I was a head coach stealing away to gaze at beauty as a salve for my soul.

Pilgrimage to Sedona

To replenish and nourish myself after a tough coaching season, I chose a bed and breakfast in Sedona, Arizona. “A...common motif to many pilgrimage stories is the sense that sacred sites exude a sense of ‘presence,’ where God, the gods, or the beauty of nature dwells.”⁴⁰⁹ I was thrilled to be far away from the hustle and bustle of work, but mostly I looked forward to the solitude. I wanted to engage my interest in Native American people and spiritualities. Uncharacteristically, I signed up for a jeep tour to one of the Sedona Mountains to see the hieroglyphics. Much to my chagrin, the jeep tour guide greeted me by saying, “I changed with another guy to take you, because we know some of the same people back in Kentucky. Plus, I know all about you and your career.” I wanted to cancel on the spot! The very last thing I wanted to do was talk to some guy about basketball! At any rate, I sucked it up and we set out for our three-hour tour. “One of the recurring themes of pilgrimage narratives is the unexpected event that occurs along the way. A pilgrim often sets out with feelings of control and a predetermined course, yet invariably the unexpected happens; either the inward journey, the outward journey, or both change, often in profound ways.”⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 64.

⁴¹⁰ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 57.

He and I, alone and high in the mountains, participated in Native American rituals and a circle ceremony. The name of it escapes me but the impact has not. The prayers, the imagery, the bond, the connectedness with all living things, the rituals, the history, my first and new spiritual friend, was more than I could hold. Monastic reformer and abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) wrote in the twelfth century: “You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.”⁴¹¹ At the end of our time together, my friend, the tour guide, after consulting with the Spirit, turned to say “I don’t know why, but I feel a strong urge to give this to you. I don’t want to part with it, as it is my most valuable possession, and I have been collecting precious stones from my journey for several years, nevertheless, it is for you. Remember your time here. You are a Great Spirit.” And with that he gave me a granny sack that held meaningful things that he had collected on his journey.

Somehow I understood in that moment that my life would never be the same. There I was at the end of a rough coaching season, wanting to run away from basketball, and ironically basketball turned out to be the conduit of such a powerful connection with this man. I will never forget him and the impact our time together had on my life and spiritual journey. If a characteristic of pilgrimage is to return to one’s sacred center, I had found my sweet spot, my heart. As Christine Valters Paintner writes, “The heart is the place of receptivity, integration, and meaning-making. It is where thinking, feeling, intuition, and wisdom come together. In this process we are called nothing short of transformation.”⁴¹² Along with a heightened use of all my

⁴¹¹ Susan Ratcliffe, ed., *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

⁴¹² Christine Valters Paintner, *Lectio Divina--The Sacred Art: Transforming Words & Images into Heart-Centered Prayer* (Woodstock, VT: Sky Light Paths, 2011), 8–9.

senses, I found that “pilgrimage involves not only all five senses, but also the heart.”⁴¹³ I was beginning to make connections of head and heart, coming into knowing what African American mystic Howard Thurman wisely knew, namely that “the longest journey is between the heart and the head,”⁴¹⁴ for “the sacred art of pilgrimage involves both an inward and outward journey.”⁴¹⁵

The attributes of something larger than myself present in our rituals were passion, generosity, kindness, hospitality, creativity, and beauty. They seemed to enter me and pull me into an experience that altered my life’s direction. It was here that I understood fully the depth of my cosmological worldview. I began to connect the childhood teachings of my grandmother’s dependence on nature for healing, being led by the moon, and so much more. They lived in a way that affirmed all things were in God and God was in all things. I began to value more deeply the rituals that honored and gave thanks for creation in new ways. I began to talk and listen to the whispering winds and talking trees, another new spiritual practice.

Following this experience in Sedona, I read the book by Chicago Bulls basketball coach, Phil Jackson entitled *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*. In the book, he narrates how he integrated his Pentecostal upbringing, influences of Native American spiritualities, and Zen Buddhism in his life and coaching, then. Moreover, he was also coaching the world’s greatest player, Michael Jordan. As this great beckoning continued, I discovered the power of attention and awareness from a basketball coach! Jackson taught me the following lessons: the gift and power of awareness. He writes that “being aware is more important than

⁴¹³ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 43.

⁴¹⁴ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 173.

⁴¹⁵ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 44.

being smart,”⁴¹⁶ for it encompasses the practice of acceptance, the art of chaos, the lessons of compassion, teamwork, and harmony.

Jackson was practicing the aforementioned in the midst of professional sports where greed and fear are the main operating principles. He countered by suggesting to the powers that be that he could motivate by love and by establishing community. This was the first time I had considered the power of love and community vs. greed and fear. A basketball coach was laying the foundation for my life’s work! I would soon be in pursuit of community and love and leave behind a world of greed and fear. In *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*, I encountered passion and creativity that mirrored my athletic context and foreshadowed what was to come.

Basketball in the Backcourt

In the years from 1995 to 1997, the process of life change was in full throttle. By the end of these years, I was lured out of the family business of basketball and into the Great Mystery. It is in these years I sensed a deep yearning for freedom and creativity. Julia Cameron’s book *The Artist’s Way: The Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* launched the process of both for me. I began to write three pages every day, emptying my mind, praying, creating, complaining, but above all, imagining. Passion, creativity, and beauty once again showed me the way. For the first time, I discovered writing as a spiritual practice. This practice led me to imagine my life in new ways, full of hope and possibility. As a result, less than six months after finishing Jackson’s book, I walked away from my coaching job at the University of Dayton, security, and comfort and leapt into infinite possibilities. The real adventure began. It was scary.

⁴¹⁶ Phil Jackson and Hugh Delehanty, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 113.

At that time, I was profoundly shaped by spiritual authors from within and outside of my own religion. I was introduced to new language, new insights, and new ways of thinking about and naming God. I discovered spiritual practices during my study of Native American Spiritualities and also from the practices I had used from *The Artist's Way*. The new spiritual enlightenment was far from my southern Baptist roots. Yet I was very comfortable with the “new” spiritual practices, as they echoed my very early formation while a youngster on my grandparents’ farm. I was free to be creative and passionate and I certainly could not or did not find this in the church.

My first engagement with interfaith dialogue was with Deepak Chopra and his Eastern Religion of Hinduism. Chopra’s *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* caused me to begin dissecting my life and rearrange my priorities. My life would never be the same. My embedded theology would no longer be acceptable. I am reminded of Marjorie Suchocki’s words from *Divinity and Diversity*:

Our encounters change us...this is not to say that dialogue cannot transform us. But the first impact may well be to transform us through fresh insights into our own religion. And that abiding principle of unrest, the reign of God that calls us to deeper modes of inclusive well-being—deeper modes of love—can renew our insight and transform our ways of developing and expressing and living our faith.⁴¹⁷

I did not want to become a Hindu after encountering Chopra, but I was certainly transformed and more curious about my own religion. With these new tools of transformation, the next ten years would prove to be a search for creativity.

While I was leaving basketball as a career, I would never leave what I had learned from being on the court. It was my time as a player on the court that laid some of the foundations for my spiritual practices. I was formed on the court and lured into the Great Mystery through sports.

⁴¹⁷ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 86.

As a coach I brought those principles with me in the way I related to the young women. Sports deeply informed my spirituality and my spirituality informed how I moved in sports. The two went hand-in-hand for me, and yet it was my choice to walk away from the court—never leaving behind all the court taught me. Once a player, always a player.

Pilgrimage to the Unknown

Between 1998 and 2000 I was on a decided adventure. I moved less than ten minutes from the heart of New York City. I was in search of my creativity and, interestingly I connected that with the beauty of churches, as I had grown fond of them during my time coaching at the University of Dayton. I was especially taken by the churches in Harlem, though when I attended the services, I never felt fulfilled. I decided instead to read the Bible on my own. The stories captured me in ways they had not before. It was exhilarating to read the stories of different characters from their viewpoints. I would understand later that I was employing a womanist hermeneutical approach.

The concept of co-partnering with God was taking shape. A God that never changes was not the real to me. A God that has everything predestined was not real to me. A God to whom we pray and sense that prayer can change things *was* real to me. In a dream in 1999 I saw myself at the head of a table and gathered around it a diverse group of folks enjoying great food and wine. Naively, I discerned I needed to be trained to make great food and learn about wine. I left New Jersey for the Le Cordon Bleu, Scottsdale Arizona Culinary School. The goal was to learn to prepare great food, learn about various wines, and then to gather a diverse group of folks and break bread and drink wine together. I would learn much later that the wine, bread, and table at which I sought to gather people was not my kitchen table, but God's table. I was deeply engrossed in creativity, beauty, and passion. The spiritual practice I learned during this time was

that the everyday task of life *is* a spiritual practice. I identified that preparation for cooking and the joy of cooking is indeed a spiritual practice. Another direct connection to my earlier formation at my grandmother's table and her hospitality became the center of my life.

During the two years **I was** at culinary school, my beloved grandmother Lucy Smith Haskins died. It was the summer of 2000. My father asked me to give a tribute. My grandmother was a celebrity in her town simply for being a woman of faith. The largest black Baptist church was not large enough to hold the people, thus the funeral was held at the largest white Southern Baptist church; it was filled to capacity. As I rose to speak, I went straight to the pulpit (a no-no for women in southern Baptist churches) to tell the world about my grandmother. What came out was a sermon about my grandmother's attributes of hospitality, generosity, lovingkindness and compassion. From her life and words, I have derived many of the spiritual practices that I now identify by more formal names such as mindfulness, centering prayer, lectio divina, walking, gazing, and so on.

Upon returning to Scottsdale, Arizona from my grandmother's funeral, I experienced a series of mysterious visitations of light. I discussed the details with a pastor, and he suspected God was "calling" me to service. I completely rejected and dismissed this notion. However, "mysterious" things continued to happen, so persistent that I could no longer deny this intense tugging. I returned to the pastor who offered hospitality, generosity, and kindness, to me, a virtually unknown person. Within six months, I reluctantly moved from the beloved sunshine of Arizona back home to Kentucky. I had not lived in Kentucky for twenty years. I was going back home to tell the people of my home church, a southern Baptist country church, that God **had** called me.

My “home” church where my family has attended for nearly a hundred years rejected me. At this point, I did not choose to be “spiritual but not religious.” I had no choice. For many years following this, I used the spiritual practices I had gleaned over the previous years. I created a theology and community for myself, which included trees, birds, water, chickens, cows, and the wind. I again remembered the stories and intimate times I shared with my grandmother that taught me to reach God with my five senses. For me, nature was my community, food was my sermon, and engaging all the senses was my connection to the Sacred, the Holy, the One. All of these engagements were a spiritual practice. I was honing my meditation skills—not for fashion, but for survival. These practices started early in my basketball career and I found solace in their implementation. In the quietness and stillness of these spaces, freshly kindled were new possibilities, creativity, and passion. I rediscovered my passion for knowledge and learning. I had questions for God that could only be answered by deeper study. I applied to Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 2006.

For three years rigorous study and writing would be my prayer and spiritual practice. My passion, creativity, and voice were engaged and shaped by many. It was here that I discovered my passion for women in the shadows of church history, women in the Bible, and women’s power. Moreover, I was enlivened by art in new ways. It would be these very attributes, those I was most passionate about, that would mark a time of deep struggle as I ran into brick walls of sexism, racism, and homophobia in the church. Despite this, I continued to preach, lead lectio divina prayers, centering prayer, and healing and wholeness services with anointing oil for those within the parish, and also for women of color in the community.

As a result of not receiving generosity, hospitality and kindness from this particular church’s leadership, I gave to myself generosity, hospitality and kindness, a necessary practice

for the journey. I retreated to the family farm for one year and embodied the spiritual practices of my youth: I communed with nature, became one with the soil, experienced the fullness of life daily, and the awe of God in creation. Just as I was settling in to spend the rest of my life living in a town of 10,000 and becoming an organic farmer, the One sent the strongest lure to date. The stillness and mindfulness practices I had learned over the years prepared me *to know* and to follow the Presence; presence echoed Presence. With nothing more than an intense lure, within thirty days I had left for California in search of a theology to fit my becoming.

I have experienced a great deal of loss, grief, rejection, and in some cases, even harm. Nevertheless, the synchronicity of many occasions allowed me to discern God's initial aim for my life. As a result, hope emerged through acts of kindness, beauty, passion, creativity, hospitality, and generosity. Moreover, the spiritual practices learned and employed, coupled with imagination, wonder, and awe created harmony in the most intense experiences. Through mindful practices I discovered the gifts of awareness and the insights of wisdom. In other words, how to be "as harmless as a dove, and wise as a serpent." Thus, in every moment I strive simply to be present and aware, to tell the truth, not be attached to the outcome, and to trust in the Great Mystery.

I was fragmented. As I rigorously pursued theological education, there was no space for the integration of my athletic shaping to reach full bloom. Athletics are not treasured in academic spaces. I was a jock but far from dumb. My first encounters with contemplation occurred when I was a player at WKU. Those practices informed me as a theologian in the making. There is theological merit in sports, merits upon which I rely and which I use as an ordained pastor in my congregation.

Pilgrimage to Bahá'í Temple

*“A haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life.”*⁴¹⁸ In the summer of 2007, as part of my immersive seminary experience, I was in Chicago to experience the HipHop Church on the West side. While that experience is full of its own gleanings, the wisdom and transformation (once again) came from a completely unknown and unexpected place. The surprise that awaited forever changed my inward and outward journey. On a day off from the internship, a friend and I went on a drive to nowhere. We headed north on the infamous Lake Shore Drive. The sun was glistening from Lake Michigan, windows down, music blaring—it was an epic day. Little did I know on this adventurous drive with no intended destination that I was driving toward new horizons on my spiritual quest and it had little to do with the heavy doctrinal, creedal, theological knowledge I was obtaining by pursuing my Master of Divinity degree.

The *Bahá’í* experience would prove to be deeply formative, deeply spiritual, and part of a faith tradition that was well beyond what I had known to this point. I liken this to a forty-minute basketball game for which there is never a guaranteed outcome. One can be prepared, favored to win, have home court advantage, and yet there are always surprises and unexpected occurrences during the game that require adjustments, many of which require a time out. The best players and the best coaches understand the flow and anticipate when a time out is needed. Moreover, during the time out good coaches and players make adjustments to the plan to ensure success. After this experience in Chicago, I would need a time out. I was at a threshold. Once again I was directed toward a “pilgrimage as a threshold experience that points to a new reality or a process of inner transformation.”⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ “House of Worship - Bahá’ís of the United States,” Baha’is of the United States, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.bahai.us/bahai-temple/>.

⁴¹⁹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 4–5.

That day, my friend and I ended up in Wilmette, Illinois, home of one of ten dedicated temples of the one Bahá'í faith, the oldest surviving Bahá'í House of Worship in the world. As we drove, it appeared in all of its majestic glory. I was spellbound by its beauty from afar and demanded we drive toward it. My friend was not so sure, good Dutch Calvinist that she was. Yet though she was skeptical, she relented. We were both deeply and profoundly changed that day. We were welcomed and went about engaging the beauty of the landscape, the artwork, the temple. She and I barely spoke to one another for more than three hours. It was understood that this was to be experienced together, but alone. Though neither of us at the time knew much about a contemplative way of engaging the Holy, the place pulled you in in a way that there were simply no words to be spoken. The Sacred was everywhere.

Breathe. Reflect. Connect. Every one of us has a soul that longs to connect with its Creator and to contribute to a better world. The Baha'i House of Worship stands as a testament to these purposes, offering a quiet and safe space to go inward and revitalize your sense of purpose in the world. Here you can lay down your burdens, contemplate your dreams and tend to your spirit. Whatever your faith background or system of belief, you are welcome to use this space for personal prayer, reflection and meditation.⁴²⁰

All of the teachings of the Bahá'í faith revolve around one central principle: that all of humanity was created as a single unit, like a family. Kujawa-Holbrook in her book, *Pilgrimage—the Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart* speaks about a Bahá'í pilgrimage in Acres as “the holiest shrine of the Bahá'í faith...located in Acre in Israel...Each day the followers turn to face the burial site as they pray, and a pilgrimage to the site is considered to be one of the most important spiritual events of a lifetime.”⁴²¹

⁴²⁰ “House of Worship - Bahá'ís of the United States.”

⁴²¹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 32.

Though I visited in Wilmette, Illinois, not in Israel, I too consider it a spiritual event of a lifetime. I would come to understand the spiritual components of the Bahá'í faith:

Every human being was created in the spirit of God's utmost love; God gave each person a soul, which has no gender, race, ethnicity or social class; When it comes to the diversity of the human race, we can "discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork" and see the beauty in one another; Divisions, hierarchies and inequities based on ethnicity, gender or social class are entirely manmade; It is up to all of us to remold our relationships, conscious of our oneness.⁴²²

On the drive back south on Lake Shore Drive, the sun was now setting, we played no music, and we gazed toward lake Michigan, this time full of questions, looking for answers out there in the lake somewhere. The electricity in my body felt similar to the electricity of hitting a game-winning shot, or the ecstasy of being on top of your game. I would learn to trust this sensation, whether it be in a temple, a basketball court, or in the crevices of my life.

The experience at the Bahá'í house of worship and the view of oneness was analogous to the oneness I experienced being a part of a team or part of my own family. I was struck by their view of the "isms" with which I have wrestled all my life. I deeply resonated with the consciousness of oneness with regard to systematic oppression. From the Bahá'í perspective,

Attitudes of prejudice, superiority and paternalism are contrary to our oneness; All forms of systemic exploitation – like racism, sexism and classism – are contrary to oneness; Developing a deep-seated consciousness of the oneness of humanity is the only hope for remedying the vast problems of a fractured world.⁴²³

I had never heard my religious traditions speak of systemic oppression in this way, and yet my athletic experience was an example of a oneness consciousness. My friend and I were coming into ourselves as a feminist and a womanist theologian, and took hope from the way in which the

⁴²² "The Oneness of Humanity," Baha'is of the United States, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.bahai.us/beliefs/building-community/oneness-of-humanity/>.

⁴²³ "The Oneness of Humanity."

Baha'i faith articulated our views. We wrestled and challenged our own beliefs and what we were learning. To be sure, this unexpected pilgrimage expanded my view of theology and spirituality. I had more questions, ones that my seminary education was not answering. The search would need to continue.

I obtained a seminary degree and became a theologian. It was good. But it still did not quite fit. The journey would have to continue. Somewhere must have more answers. I deeply resonated with the tenets, but I wanted to find these tenets in my own Christian heritage. They had to be somewhere, but I had yet to find them. That happened when a professor at my seminary directed me to the early Christian mystics. I scratched the surface at seminary, but needed more. Besides, I thought, what I was studying and experiencing was not deeply resonating with my formation in sports, and yet I knew there was a link. I would later learn that the known and unknown, planned and unplanned, indeed “a sacred art...[that] transcends religious, national, cultural and linguistic boundaries,”⁴²⁴ was within me. As a result of sports, I had the opportunity to transcend religious boundaries. I communed with those different from me and deeply respected and appreciated their perspectives. This was also the shaping of my spirituality.

Pilgrimage to Haley Farm

I was dubbed the point guard preacher in 2008 by Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III when I engaged with thousands of pilgrims on the Alex Haley farm in Clinton, Tennessee, for the Children Defense Fund and Proctor Institute. Rev. Dr. Moss served as the Proctor Co-Pastor-in-Residence. He, a track athlete in his college days, and I a basketball player, seamlessly discussed

⁴²⁴ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 7.

athletics and God. As we walked toward the Riggio-Lynch Chapel designed by Maya Lin, he turned and said, “Aaah, you are a point guard preacher I see.” We parted. I stopped in my tracks as the words sunk deep in my soul. Early the next morning, with the dew heavy on the grass, the sun arose, and black folks were walking briskly to make it in time for meditations offered by Reverend Dr. Jerry Streets.

As I walked toward the barn on the campus that was refurbished to house the library, aptly named Langston Hughes library, Moss’ words were still ringing in my ears. This too was a convergence of womanist spirituality and sports, and it was also deeply steeped in my heritage. We were on a farm, in the South, with a pond and a barn and several small cottage houses with porches, a sea of black folks, and a sprinkling of others, laughing, talking, and eating together under one big tent, with the smell of honeysuckle in the air. And the *pièce de résistance*? Books in a barn! Clearly, this *was* heaven.

At the meditation that following morning, all I could think about was “point guard preacher.” What makes this even more profound was that, at that time, I had no plans whatsoever to preach or to pastor a church. Rev. Dr. Moss and Rev. Dr. Streets both spoke and held me in the prophetic, speaking into my life that which I could not see or imagine. This pilgrim was again, surprised. Moss and I would cross paths again at the Chautauqua Institute in 2010. His greeting? “Aaah, it’s the point guard preacher.” To which I could respond, “Yes, I am preaching.”

Frederick Buechner holds that life itself is sacramental.⁴²⁵ To believe that means that when something holy happens—while walking on the beach, on a hike, making love, or playing

⁴²⁵ “Sacrament,” Frederick Buechner, accessed August 26, 2019, <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/10/18/sacrament>.

a sport, in my case, basketball, it can be said to be holy because “it is transparent time, time you can see through to something deep inside time.”⁴²⁶I contend that these sacramental moments occur for both participants and spectators engaged in a basketball game.

Point Guard Spirituality can be said to be incarnational, sacramental, and radical in revelation in that it understands that all things are holy and iconic because God’s presence undergirds and moves through all things. God’s presence, like water, like the Eucharist, is to be experienced, on the ground, in our lives, and in our relationships. It provides not only strength for the journey but also the comfort of belonging to one another and to God. Similar to the ethos of a team that belongs and is dependent on one another, so too are we dependent on God. What we do affects the coach, the team and ourselves. I would go further to say that God depends on us to be good partners, to engage in relationships in a way that would create the best possible outcome in each experience to accomplish the greater good.

Point Guard is the position in basketball that I played my entire career. This position is analogous to a quarterback in football. The primary skill set needed to excel is great vision—being able to see things in slow motion as they are happening. What separates good point guards, from great point guards is an accelerated ability to hone our skills with peak performance ability. They are attuned to and know the other four players’ positions, roles, and where they should be at any given moment. Thus, present moment awareness is heightened capacity they have. The ability to see the game unfolding in slow-motion allows for a kind of amplified vision that sees or anticipates things happening three-to-five seconds before they actually do.

The importance of this is that we are all created by the One, and therefore our human dignity is to be treasured and properly given away to others for mutual, reciprocal, and

⁴²⁶ Buechner, “Sacrament,”

harmonious relationships. The fact is we are all inextricably intertwined in the web of life. We all *become* through the process of cultivating and maintaining our own sense of wholeness and connectedness. We enter into relationships with others and the Earth in ways that embody our Creator. Incarnational intimacy leads to communion with oneself, others, and God. This sacrament allows us to enter into partnership as co-creators with God in the work of healing and transforming the world.

Pilgrimage to Rome, 2nd Half

It seems blasphemous even to attempt to capture my experience on the floor of the Colosseum in Rome. There is simply not a way to articulate with words the feeling, the memory, the laps that were running in my mind, body and soul. In some ways, it is parallel to trying to describe what ecstasy is or does. It is like trying to quantify God or an experience with the Holy. Words are inadequate. And yet I will attempt to describe the experience, knowing it is not close to all that I experienced inwardly.

As I walked onto the floor of the Colosseum, the hairs on my arms stood on end. I began to feel heat rising from the bottom of my toes to the tip of my head, and though the day was warm, this was a different kind of heat. It was internal and had an intensity that almost overtook me. I have lived most of my life with the frustration of fragmentation. At any moment, in any given location, rare was the time or place that I could show up with and in my complete self. To my surprise (there it is again!), the floor of the Colosseum was where I found wholeness. I will try to explain.

I did not know that the Colosseum would be my Mecca, but from the moment I stepped out onto its floor I *knew*. There, my mind, body and soul were home. I was home in my very being. The years of division within myself had come home. Certainly I have had other places of

feeling at home with myself, but this was different. Perhaps this was the third stage of *incorporation* pilgrimage, as noted by Kujawa-Holbrook's, an incorporation from the first pilgrimage with my team in 1993. It took some thirty-six years to complete the cycle. While this is true, there is a greater truth that Kujawa-Holbrook also articulates about pilgrims and pilgrimages: a need to belong. She posits: "Home is more than the place we live in. In the spiritual sense, our journey home is about returning to a place of *belonging*."⁴²⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook continues: "One common definition of spirituality is a deep sense of meaning and purpose with a sense of belonging that promotes integration, acceptance, and wholeness."⁴²⁸

The fragmentation I spoke of earlier, I now know was a result of not feeling loved, not having a sense of belonging securely—anywhere. Kujawa-Holbrook observes that:

The security of a sense of belonging allows individuals the freedom to grow and become themselves...(and) a sense of belonging comes with boundaries that can either protect and nourish us or hinder us, limiting our chances to experience the fullness of life....a sense of belonging is integral to an individual's ability to feel loved by God.⁴²⁹

My thirty-six-year journey to feel secure and loved followed Kujawa-Holbrook's stages of pilgrimage: separation, transition, incorporation. It began in 1987 fresh out of college, on my way to play professional basketball in Israel, a situation I left with an overwhelming sense of failure, defeat, and loss. The next pilgrimage occurred in the summer of 1993 when I took my team to Italy, and the third pilgrimage in this cycle concluded in Fall 2018.

One could say that the pilgrimage of life for me has been a large circle with a plethora of circles in it, some of which I have discussed in this dissertation. I have followed the stages of

⁴²⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 143.

⁴²⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 143–44.

⁴²⁹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 145.

pilgrimage: I have been on the Hero's journey. I have been on a labyrinth walk of life. "The labyrinth is known as a path, a way through the wilderness, or a journey inward to deeper levels of consciousness."⁴³⁰ A labyrinth, however, is more than concentric circles. For me, the sacrament of my life has been a pathway of transformation and growth, living in the ambiguity of challenging questions. It would be easy to liken the labyrinth to a maze, but as Kujawa-Holbrook points out "a maze is designed with dead ends and the labyrinth, despite its twists and turns, always leads to the center...[and] the center is reachable...and the pilgrim is guided along the way."⁴³¹ Moreover, a maze values the outer world in that choices are about what direction to take and the choices therein, whereas the labyrinth values both the inward and outward journey. The labyrinth, says Kujawa-Holbrook, "instill[s] trust through reflection...to enhance spiritual growth, bring healing and a sense of peace."⁴³²

Once a pilgrim has completed the journey to the center, it is expected that they will take the inherent wisdom gleaned, the spiritual growth as a result, back to nourish others. What have I taken back? The ways in which the hole in my heart needed to heal, rediscovering God's love for me, and sharing that love freely with the world. I am loved in all of my parts.

Blackqueerwomanathletecoachchefclergypastortheologianspiritualscholar. I have "come home to myself" by way of pilgrimage. "If the sacred art of pilgrimage is not about escapism, avoiding problems, or forgetting where we come from, we need to return home. The way of the pilgrim is essentially about fostering greater *connection* between our past, our present, and our future."⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 107.

⁴³¹ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 108.

⁴³² Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 108.

⁴³³ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 149.

Kujawa-Holbrook continues: “A home is not limited to a building; it is also the spiritual and social center of the people who live there. Home is where we ultimately belong—it is the place we are welcomed, the place where we find love, and the place where we find healing when we need it.”⁴³⁴

In her memoir, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, black feminist, cultural critic, educator and, writer, bell hooks recalls her life’s pilgrimage. hooks, like me, is from a rural Kentucky town. She asks, “What does it mean to call a place home? When can we say that we truly belong?” Like me, hooks life has a repetitive circular journey through which she explores the questions of place and belonging. hooks writes: “returning to Kentucky...I knew that this was the end of my journey in search of home...I am doing the work of self-healing, of earth healing, of reveling in this piecing together my world in such a way that I can be whole and holy.”⁴³⁵ I do not know if I will return permanently to Kentucky, like hooks, but for now, I am at peace knowing I am home within myself.

Another Kentuckian, farmer, writer, and academic, Wendell Berry believes that home is a place for dwelling and a symbol of connection. He writes in his poetry:

*And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles,
no matter how long,
but only by a spiritual journey,
a journey of one inch,
very arduous and humbling and joyful,
by which we arrive at the ground at our feet,
and learn to be at home.*⁴³⁶

⁴³⁴ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 146.

⁴³⁵ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 68–69.

⁴³⁶ Wendell Berry, *The Collected Poems of Wendell Berry 1957-1982* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1987).

My life's work is to take the wisdom I gained from my pilgrimage inward and my basketball journey and provide "hospitable spaces...places that provide...a sense of 'home,' with support, nurture, and a framework for growth...both existential and material...spaces that encourage new insights, nurture deeper relationships, and promote personal and spiritual growth."⁴³⁷

The Colosseum for me is *the* place where my sports and spirituality intersected. It was in the Colosseum that I found the breath of invitation that called on both parts of me—athlete and theologian. I was called to a sense of wonder and awe. I saw myself as a young girl practicing visualizations and shooting buzzer-beater snots. The Colosseum was also the place that called upon my time spent in deep contemplation as part of the sports psychology department at WKU. The Colosseum allowed space for ecstasy, the same ecstasy I felt on the court and in deep contemplation with God. "Pilgrims go on sacred journeys seeking nourishment and replenishment for every part of themselves. Even in relative solitude a pilgrim is always in relationship—with self, with the Divine, with the natural environment, and with those they leave behind."⁴³⁸

Post-Game IV

This dissertation has explored the following questions: Is sports a valid location for spiritual formation? How can sports, for participants and spectators, be considered spiritual formation? What needs to be expanded in our definitions of religion or spirituality considering the relationship of formation between sports and spirituality? What theological beliefs must be challenged and/or expanded to consider the relationality of spiritual formation and sports? What is the capacity of each to inform the another? I answer these questions through the lens of

⁴³⁷ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 144.

⁴³⁸ Kujawa-Holbrook, *Pilgrimage-the Sacred Art*, 45.

competition, community, communion and compassion. Before I delve into the definitions, we must first look at *com*. The root word *com*, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, means “together, together with, in combination or union.”⁴³⁹ *Competition* is a process of striving with an opponent toward a quest of excellence and/or winning, motivated by the love of the game and shared enjoyment; *Community* is a body of people sharing a sense of fellowship and solidarity; *Communion* is an action of sharing or holding something in common with others in mutual participation; *Compassion* is a bond of genuine connection by which one becomes most deeply human to revive the pulse of another. Competition, community, communion, and compassion shed light on the connective tissue between sports and spiritual formation as the definitions are expanded and more inclusive to reach beyond the realm of traditional Christian mores.

Sports have always been foundational in faith formation and should again be brought to the fore. After all, “sports may be one of the most common ways in which people experience the self-transcendence that can come through being present.”⁴⁴⁰ As such, “evidence suggests...as early as 1500 BC...not just games, but complex rituals in which the movement of the ball symbolized the movement of the heavenly bodies across the skies,” we see the connection of sports and spiritual formation. Within the Bible, Paul specifically uses illustrative athletic metaphors to convey faith. In the same way, we have the opportunity to integrate spirituality and sports to enhance and encourage spiritual formation.

What does it mean to compete with God? *Com*, “together, together with, in combination or union;”⁴⁴¹ and *petition*, “a formal...request...appealing to authority,” when

⁴³⁹ “Com-, Prefix.”

⁴⁴⁰ Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond*, 11.

⁴⁴¹ “Com-, Prefix.”

joined, highlights that to compete with God is to co-create for an outcome. Competition has often been seen as being in opposition to another. I suggest that competition is about co-creating *the best* in one another. We petition God for God's best in much the same way as an athlete petitions an opponent to bring their best. Such a stance makes us look at opponents as co-creators rather than as adversaries.

Community, in an arena, looks like hundreds or thousands of people gathered together sharing a sense of fellowship and solidarity. On Sunday mornings, congregants gather together in fellowship and solidarity in faith. Picture it, the 1996 Olympic games, Muhammad Ali lighting the torch. I was there. It was pure exhilaration! My brother and I were separated from my sister and mother as they were sitting elsewhere in the stadium. We found their eyes among the thousands of people. We connected with them in an exchange and shared together a moment we *knew* would be etched in our hearts and minds forever. Everyone in the stadium felt like kindred spirits, one community erupting in ecstasy over *The Greatest of All Time* lighting the torch. It was in this sense of fellowship and solidarity I was able to connect with strangers in the Spirit of it all.

The experience was pure magic. In the same way, when I was at an Episcopal church and a visiting bishop processed, it was analogous. Why? Because this bishop represented me. He was queer. For the first time I was in solidarity and fellowship with someone who was queer and clergy. He was a stranger and yet he was kindred. Like the Olympic stadium experience, the feelings of ecstasy, dare I say excitement, looking and connecting with the souls of everyone gathered, was also pure magic. Both were mystical experiences—one in community sharing fellowship and solidarity in the church, and the other in an arena. For me, there are no distinctions between the two experiences. In both, sports and spirituality join in what Holmes

calls a “communal contemplation,”⁴⁴² as they are “subjected to the gaze of both the individual and the community.”⁴⁴³ This is how community informs spiritual formation. Community is not dependent on one’s own faith tradition. Rather, it is shared in fellowship and solidarity as it reaches from the temple or church to the arena.

Communion is an act of sharing or holding something in common with others in mutual participation. For many Christians, communion is solely focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus, as an exemplar, certainly shared his life in a way that drew people and formed a community through communion as mutual participation. The way communion manifests in sports is through teams that engage in mutual participation and form community. This can also be seen in Christian spirituality when focusing on the life of Jesus rather than on his death and resurrection. For it is through the example of his life that we commit ourselves to engaging in restorative practices of justice and wholeness in a fragmented world. As the pastor of a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation, where the table is the primary focus, I am well aware of the actions of sharing and holding something in common with others in mutual participation. We gather at the table with a focus on solidarity and fellowship. This makes us a community. We participate in the cup and bread as the “bread of life” and the cup as “strength for the journey.” This suggests the life we live and the strength we draw from the journey comes from our source. As an athlete, every practice, game, and community engagement speaks to communion as it highlights the theological disposition of the *imago dei* and creation. When we

⁴⁴² Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xvi.

⁴⁴³ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xvi.

are able to hold in common with others mutual participation as a goal that strives to make us better, we are engaging in communion and are thus formed spiritually.⁴⁴⁴

One thing we know about sports as a participant or spectator is the role of passion. This intense desire and enthusiasm that we often come to know from sports is one of its most enduring qualities. The root word *com* combined with *passion* means coming together with + intense desire and enthusiasm. As I have defined compassion as a “bond of genuine connection by which one becomes most deeply human to revive the pulse of another,” this expands what people, and particularly congregants, think of when considering passion or compassion. In the church, passion is generally tied solely to suffering and/or enduring, and when wed with *com*, compassion becomes to “suffer with.” While this can also be true, compassion need not only be about suffering. For teams, passion is a relational unifying emotion, with intense desire and enthusiasm, that fosters and fuels competition. It ignites one to another in teams, much as the Holy Spirit can ignite persons in congregations, person-to-person. Compassion calls us into co-creation with God through our connectedness to the humanity in others and the sacredness of the earth. This is also true in teams where a bond is not easily broken; bonds of compassion woven in teams last a lifetime. This passion propels a deep abiding within teams that reflects the biblical teaching calling us to lay down one’s life down for another. That is the essence of true humanity. I have found this sort of compassion more in teams than in congregations.

For competition, community, communion, and compassion in sports to be considered spiritual formation, it is necessary also to queer and inclusively expand theological doctrines. I am not arguing against long held beliefs. Rather, I propose a broadening of paradigms. I point toward a more enlightened, directive, and rigorous engagement with Christian mystics and

⁴⁴⁴ A deep dive into the theological beliefs about communion are outside the scope of this dissertation.

mystical experiences, for therein lie the deepest connections with “flow.” A gaze toward the early church, the early church matriarchs, and mystics will enhance and support the connections between spirituality and sports. To only rely on orthodox Christian history is to miss the valuable and pertinent contributions of a spirituality that has the greatest connective tissues. It is essential to focus on early Christian spirituality, yet it is outside the scope of this dissertation.

As a former athlete and coach, I have seen the ways in which spiritual formation has taken shape in my life. My experiences have shown me that through sports my ability to engage an expansive, more inclusive God, has deepened. My willingness to question and critique was shaped in my grandmother’s home and on the basketball court. In the field of sports as spiritual formation, my experiences point to the intersections of what has been termed the sacred and the secular. I highlight, through narrative, the importance of cultural and theological critique gained through my time as a player and coach.

In addition, as a queer Black woman it is important to have my voice heard in the guild, as many queer Black women’s voices are missing—particularly in the field of spiritual formation. As my foremothers did not have the same opportunity, I have now to locate my sexuality, for it is important in this important field of study to have representation from all forms of scholarship, culture, and embodiment. It is through my embodiment that I queer every space I enter. One such space being the academy. While I am not a Queer Theologian, I am a queer theologian. In the same way, I am a Black woman theologian but I am not a Black Theologian. I am a scholar with multiple identities. My experiences add to the field of Black women in spiritual formation as the representation is scant. Through the interconnection of sports and spirituality, I add yet another perspective on how spiritual formation develops through a cultural lens.

Moreover, in the field of practical theology, it is important to have sports brought back to the fore of formational thought. Having Black women scholars outside of the traditional Black church is imperative and my connection between sports and spirituality is one way that speaks to this formation outside of the Black church. While other scholars have lightly traversed sports, as a former All-American athlete my first-hand experience lends itself to my construction of *A Womanist Spirituality and Sports*. It is through this particular lens that I challenge ways of looking at spiritual formation. In this way I use sports as a lens through which I make the theological practical and the practical theological. This is but one way, and yet it is fertile ground in the field of practical theology.

I have been in the midst of spiritual formation my entire life. Among my most spiritually formative experiences and teachers have been nature, my grandmother, and sports. I have been to holy temples and dined at the table of those who are culturally, religiously, sexually different than me. I have prayed at the Wailing Wall and gone to the Dome of the Rock. I have tasted the fullness of humanity in pain, suffering, and heartache in arenas as well as congregations. In every arena, table, and church, I queer the space by my presence. My embodiment has challenged norms and offered social critique. Therefore, my embodiment alone is a vehicle for change. Sports have shown up in every aspect of my life. Most, if not all of my “Christian” formation, has come from athletics rather than congregationally. My spiritual formation occurred on teams and on the court, rather than in the pews on Sunday morning. As a result of the practices I learned as an athlete, I am a better and more grounded leader.

Chapter 5

Point Guard Spirituality: QWEST

*Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in face of all types of discrimination... The rules of the game are the same for everyone. Behavior is guided by fair play and good sportsmanship.*⁴⁴⁵
-Nelson Mandela

Pre-Game V

Sports and spirituality for me have always gone hand-in-hand. As you read from the stories of pilgrimage, sports, and spirituality, head-and-heart have been the common themes in my labyrinthine journey of life. It is where I was introduced to Coach Phil Jackson and his minister-like ethos on contemplative practices and spiritual awakenings. It is also the place I found my deep call. For a very long time I believed that this call happened when I was thirty years old, but no, it happened my first time overseas in Tel Aviv. I had no idea that God was luring me into the fold as I was there as a professional basketball player.

The intersections of sports and call for me have been a theme, as conscious a theme as my grandmother's table. I see now that throughout the course of my life pilgrimage was monumental for me. Sports and spirituality are my bread and butter. Jackson states,

Even in this highly competitive world, I've discovered that when you free players to use *all* their sources—mental, physical, and spiritual—an interesting shift in awareness occurs...the joy they experience working in harmony is a powerful motivating force that comes from deep within.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁵ Laureus, *Nelson Mandela, Laureus World Sports Awards 2000, Monaco*, accessed June 26, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=GdopyAFP0DI.

⁴⁴⁶ Jackson and Delehanty, *Sacred Hoops*, 5.

Jackson highlights the importance of being in balance with the self and the sacred. I too share that same belief. The culmination of using autoethnography, informed by Perrin's hermeneutic theory, Walker's mysticism, Holmes' cosmology, Kujawa-Holbrook's pilgrimage, and Rogers' narrative construction is Point Guard Spirituality.

It calls upon the wisdom of the past and hope for the future. It brings together the teachings of my grandmother and the impact of so many spiritual influences in my life. This spirituality is about balance of the mental, physical, and spiritual—like Jackson. In his book *Eleven Rings: The Soul of Success*, Jackson says, “with leadership, as with most things in life, the best approach is always the simplest.”⁴⁴⁷

Mindfulness on the Court

Surprisingly, my first experience with mindfulness was in sports. Back then, the terms then were “mental skills” or “mental toughness.” Back in 1983, our team participated in a group study led by a then first-year graduate student, now a thirty-five-year performance psychologist veteran, Dr. Elizabeth Shoenfelt; Becky, as we called her. We practiced the mental game with Becky in a myriad of ways, for our individual enhancement, for our team, and to gain an edge on our opponents.

We engaged practices of mind-body connection to help us specifically with concentration for free throw shooting, a small part of the basketball game but often the difference between winning and losing. Becky trained us to use visualization and mental imagery, to use a repeated mantra to assist in present moment awareness ,and we rehearsed in our mind, the body

⁴⁴⁷ Phil Jackson and Hugh Delehanty, *Eleven Rings: The Soul of Success* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 11.

movements needed for successful free throw shooting. My teammates and I gained a tremendous boost from the insights we learned from Becky.

In Shoenfelt's, 2019 book, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, she uses the greater part of the book to address "the body (physiological skills and the mind-body connection)."⁴⁴⁸ She highlights relaxation, controlling performance anxiety, and mindfulness, followed by practices to develop or enhance each.⁴⁴⁹ She posits, "the ability to focus is an important mental skill for an athlete in a competitive situation. The athlete must be able to concentrate on relevant aspects of the situation and block out distracting, irrelevant information."⁴⁵⁰ She continues, "the component skills involved in a winning focus include attentional skills, self-talk, and control of the physiological arousal."⁴⁵¹ For Shoenfelt, mindfulness "is a state in which an individual purposefully focuses on targeted aspects of the present and fully accepts, without judgment or evaluation, the emotions/he is experiencing."⁴⁵²

Shoenfelt, sounding like a basketball coach, shouts, "Yes. You do need to practice."⁴⁵³ I believe that her work with our team was vital to winning, such as in the Texas game recounted in chapter one. Shoenfelt, who has worked with many elite athletes, including Olympic Gold medalist swimmer Claire Donahue, observes, "elite athletes recognize the importance of practice...and the need to take advantage of every session by focusing on developing specific

⁴⁴⁸ Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes: A Workbook for Competitive Success* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 84.

⁴⁴⁹ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 85–88.

⁴⁵⁰ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 85.

⁴⁵¹ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 85.

⁴⁵² Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 87.

⁴⁵³ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 96.

skills and working hard—even when they do not feel like it.”⁴⁵⁴ She emphasizes this importance of practice in order to hone in on what she calls “automaticity,” making a skill automatic through continued and consistent practice. The benefits of automaticity are efficiency, accuracy, speed, the investment of little thought, and being less susceptible to stress and fatigue. As a result of practicing for such automaticity, one can better retain skills over long periods of time, complete skills more successfully, and most importantly, can do those skills without intentionally thinking about them because they have become ingrained.⁴⁵⁵ I vividly recall how “automaticity” aided me and several of my teammates. Shoenfelt demands, “it is not ‘practice that makes perfect,’ but *perfect practice* that makes perfect.”⁴⁵⁶

As a result of the early sports formation with Dr. Shoenfelt, and clearly of spiritual formation as well, when I became a coach, I was emphatic about the mental aspect of basketball. As an assistant coach at the University of Arizona, our team worked with sports psychologist and author of the *Peak Performance Playbook*, Dr. Jeff Janssen. Janssen assisted our team with mental toughness and team chemistry. This has a parallel in spirituality for mindfulness praxis helps individuals attain their best selves, their “peak performance,” contributing to the peak performance of the team, or *communitas*. Later, I would continue these formations toward a more formal theological/spiritual sense. Quite naturally, this early shaping from sports was the path toward studying spiritual formation and the praxis of such in theology.

Sitting in Dr. Shoenfelt’s office on the WKU campus in the summer of 2019, she and I recalled those early days between 1983 and 1987, she at the beginning of her career and I at the

⁴⁵⁴ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 96.

⁴⁵⁵ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 97.

⁴⁵⁶ Shoenfelt, *Mental Skills for Athletes*, 100.

beginning of mine. We reminisced and were both left in awe of the twists and turns of life since then. Before departing, she handed me her new book saying, “you will recognize much in the workbook section.” Indeed, I do, for it was the beginning of a lifelong pursuit of marrying spirituality and sports.⁴⁵⁷

When I walked outside feeling the nostalgia of the campus, I opened her book and found she had penned: “For Clemette, a good friend and colleague. Play strong, play smart. First with the head. Then with the heart...Betsy.” Indeed, the head and heart connection are what my pilgrimages of life have been, connecting head and heart, a wholeness as the answer to my fragmentations.

These mental skills I first learned as a college freshman resurfaced in a more profound way at the invitation of my advisor, Frank Rogers, a narrative pedagogical scholar and compassion guru. Learning from Rogers deepened and extended my ability to use practices used earlier in my life in sports to ways for spiritual formation and practice. For Rogers, “practice is at the heart of it all.”⁴⁵⁸ By this he specifically means “The Compassion Practice,” as he calls it, which he explains in this way: “Catch your breath (get grounded); Take your pulse (cultivate compassion for yourself); Take the other’s pulse (cultivate compassion for another); and decide what to do (discern compassionate action).”⁴⁵⁹ Rogers uses the acronym PULSE to describe the six dimensions that compose and define compassion:

P—Paying attention. Perceiving another’s experience with a nonjudgmental, nonreactive clarity.

U—Understanding empathically. Being moved by the sometime hidden suffering within that person.

⁴⁵⁷ Elizabeth L. Shoenfelt, Conversation at Western Kentucky University, July 8, 2019.

⁴⁵⁸ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 18.

⁴⁵⁹ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion* 19.

L—Loving with connection. Being filled with and extending an all-embracing care.
S—Sensing the sacredness. Recognizing and savoring the cosmic expanse of compassion that holds and heals all wounds.
E—Embodying new life. Yearning for the restorative flourishing is to be birthed with one another.⁴⁶⁰

From the *PULSE* of this compassionate connection, we then “ACT,” with “tangible acts of healing, kindness, and care.”⁴⁶¹ Compassionate action can be embodied, according to Rogers, in the following ways: through generosity, service, witness, solidarity, empowerment, and justice.⁴⁶²

Shoenfelt and Rogers, the former a sports psychologist, the latter a practical theologian, both communicate at the core of their work how to be grounded with an awareness of oneself and those around you, how to be connected with oneself and others in ways to bring about a common good. Such ways are good for individuals, good for teams, and good for the well-being of communities. While Shoenfelt stops short of naming anything sacred in and about her work with teams and individuals, one could say, that for some of her participants, if they had the language, they might call her work sacred. Because we know that sports for girls contribute to healthy self-esteem, confidence and empowerment, connecting this with a sense of sacredness is possible.

In the Women’s Sports Foundation’s 2018 research on *Teen Sports in America: Why Participation Matters*, key findings concluded that sports are transformative in the lives of teens. Moreover, sports participation and physical activity support their long-term health, achievement,

⁴⁶⁰ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 30–31.

⁴⁶¹ Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 27.

⁴⁶² Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 111–13.

and well-being.⁴⁶³ The research “showed that teens who played sports fared better than non-athletes on...psychological health, including high self-esteem and stronger social connections, such as higher levels of social support and few feelings of loneliness.”⁴⁶⁴ They also concluded that “although findings suggested that sports are racially and ethnically diverse (with similar participation rates found for white, black, and Hispanic youth), clear differences in the racial and ethnic composition of each type of sport suggests the need to improve equity and diversity within certain sports.”⁴⁶⁵ (Basketball is the most popular sport for boys and girls by a margin of nearly 6 percent over all other sports.)

With research that confirms the value of sports, it makes sense to further these efforts to include spirituality, in light of research showing the dramatic decline of young people’s engagement in religion. Sports is instrumental in the life of youth, specifically for girls. As a practical theologian that engages spiritual formation, I suggest that we are not being thorough in our scholarship if we do not look deeply at the value of sports as spiritual practice and/or sports as a means of spiritual formation. This is where *Queer and Queering: A Womanist Spirituality of Sports* is useful and necessary.

The latest Women’s Sports Foundation findings espouse earlier 2010 findings, by Dr. Betsey Stevenson, an economist at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, that

⁴⁶³ Nicole Zarrett, Philip Veliz, and Don Sabo, “Teen Sport in America: Why Participation Matters” (East Meadows, NY: Women’s Sports Foundation, January 2018).

⁴⁶⁴ Zarrett, Veliz and Sabo, “Teen Sport in America,” 2018.

⁴⁶⁵ Zarrett, Veliz and Sabo, “Teen Sport in America,” 2018.

showed that increasing girls' opportunities to play sports had a direct effect on girls' long-term education and career success.⁴⁶⁶

To this end, tennis superstar Venus Williams, four-time Olympic gold medalist, seven-time Grand Slam winner, and entrepreneur, explored this idea on a personal level in her book, *Come to Win: Business Leaders, Artists, Doctors, and Other Visionaries on How Sports Can Help You Top Your Profession*. Williams reflects on how playing tennis prepared her to launch her own businesses. Williams compiles similar personal stories from about fifty successful individuals, such as stateswoman Condoleezza Rice, entrepreneur and former NBA player Earvin "Magic" Johnson, and fashion designer Vera Wang, all of whom credit what they learned from playing sports as a major contributor to their success in other sectors of life.

What was missing for me in Williams' book, though understandably, as it is not the book's main thesis, was how her formation as a Jehovah Witness informed her successes, and how faith formation influenced other sports notables. Why did she not connect sport and her faith and the faith of others in her book? To bridge the gap connecting the life stories of athletes and coaches to success with how their spirituality aided (or not) their future success seems like a worthwhile venture.

Increasingly, other academic disciplines, most notably, positive psychology, parades itself as "the scientific study of what makes life most worth living."⁴⁶⁷ To be sure, as spiritual formation scholars, we would have a surfeit of answers for what makes life worth living. However, the more we stay joined at the hip and cling too tightly to orthodoxy—doctrinal,

⁴⁶⁶ Betsey Stevenson, "Beyond the Classroom: Using Title IX to Measure the Return to High School Sports," Working Paper (Cambridge MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2010).

⁴⁶⁷ Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park, "Meaning and Positive Psychology," *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2014): 2.

theological, creedal, biblical—the more we leave gaps for other disciplines to fill, as in fact they have. The American Academy of Religion (AAR) has a program unit called “Religion, Sport and Play.” The following is the unit’s purpose:

Provide(s) an opportunity for scholars to engage in emerging research at the intersection of religion and sport, games, and play...interested in examining these topics across broad geographical areas, religious traditions, and historical eras. We encourage critical reflection regarding relationships of religious institutions to sport, play, and games; theological and spiritual experiences of participants and spectators invested in these activities; and the cross-cultural applicability of the received categories.⁴⁶⁸

Purpose statements are the “ideals,” and yet ideals and function are two different things. I attended one of the unit’s presentation of papers at the 2014 AAR meeting. I stayed for less than fifteen minutes. The room was full of white men (not unusual at AAR), there were few women, and not one person of color (again, not unusual for AAR).

Dynamics at AAR are what they are, yet the paper presentation as I recall, was about wrestling in the South, and about seeking to value the World Wrestling Federation. While everyone is entitled to their view, I understood very quickly this was not a welcoming or safe space for me. Moreover, I knew the chair of the committee at that time, still a member of the steering committee; furthermore, the facilitator that day and I went to seminary together. All this is to say that the purpose of this committee did not function as such in the space. I have not returned, though my work is on precisely what this unit ostensibly espouses. I will not return. I do not wish to be joined at the hip with such a group, such an ethos. Moreover, I want my work to un-cling, rather than cling.

Because sports are a universal language, should not our engagement theologically also be more universal? Currently, there are no studies by the Pew Research Center regarding sports and

⁴⁶⁸ “Religion, Sport, and Play Unit | PAPERS,” accessed August 30, 2019, <https://papers.aarweb.org/content/religion-sport-and-play-unit>.

religion. In light of the rapidly decline in youth and young adult participation in religion and religious institutions, it seems particularly important to understand that sports are transformative in the lives of teens, and that the increase in the feelings and frequency of spiritual peace and well-being in adults so often occurs through meditation. I contend that sports and spirituality need to be intricately intertwined, and that spirituality be a more valued practice. If well-being is a benefit of sports for youth and the Pew Research Center studies show that frequency of spiritual peace and well-being is a topic of study (Pew Research doesn't measure well-being of youth, though it does measure the well-being of parents of children under 18), then I posit that one place to examine spiritual well-being in youth is through sports.⁴⁶⁹

Point Guard Spirituality

The research and gleanings I have gathered in this dissertation, led me to ask my own so what? As a result, my contribution is Point Guard Spirituality that encompasses seeing the whole and the parts; it anticipates two passes ahead; it critiques and encourages; it is individual and team; it assists—sets others up for success; requires groundedness; gathers the team together in huddle; calls the plays; values play; values excitement and joy, a sense of adventure, a sense of oneness; and takes risks. Point Guard Spirituality values encouragement over critique as it is important to maintain the ethos of team and oneness. It is underpinned by the belief that “people do not live or die for a creed, for this or that belief. Large-scale changes such as those that make liberation possible, which necessitate changes of the heart as well as changes of the mind, are not really possible on the grounds of reason alone. People need a story.”⁴⁷⁰ Point Guard Spirituality

⁴⁶⁹ “Frequency of Feeling Spiritual Peace and Wellbeing - Religion in America” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, n.d.), <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-feeling-spiritual-peace-and-wellbeing/>.

⁴⁷⁰ “Frequency of Feeling Spiritual Peace and Wellbeing - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), accessed August 30, 2019.

is steeped in narrative while acknowledging narrative is not the only way to engage it. It assumes,

Narratives allow us to link the distinct events of our lives by making us note that something is but a part of something else and that it is the cause or the effect of something else. Personal narratives, then, are stories of one's life that make it possible for the other person to give meaning to her life and to interpret it within its historical and cultural context.⁴⁷¹

Point Guard Spirituality draws upon womanist and early Christian spirituality as a way of engaging the world and sacred entities. It also calls us to reflect theologically on our own journeys, how they have influenced our decisions, and what they illumine for the future.

Point Guard Spirituality houses an *all y'all* ethos, meaning it is transdisciplinary, transdenominational, transreligious, and queer. Being transdisciplinary focuses on the importance of other disciplines and how they inform our narratives. Being transdenominational works from the assumption that all means all, no matter the denominational affiliation, if there be one. While leaning toward a Christian bias, Point Guard Spirituality is transreligious, as it is not solely a Christian work. It is like a mixtape, holding multiple songs from various genres that together form the perfect playlist. Lastly, Point Guard Spirituality is queer in that it seeks to problematize norms by “queering systems” and in that my location is as a queer black woman.

Point Guard Spirituality highlights the interconnection of sports and spirituality and how we are, or can be, spiritually formed in sports and play, both as a participant and as a spectator. It seeks to dismantle oppressive systems through love, compassion, and contemplation. It encourages play and sport as a means to experience the Sacred and community more fully. It

⁴⁷¹ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Creating a Liberating Culture: Latinas’ Subversive Narratives,” in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford Press, 2001), 128.

values the arts, culture, good food, music, dance, and other forms of self-expression. It is, at its core, a way to engage spirituality through sports and play.

Purpose

The purpose of Point Guard Spirituality is to *Play to Win*. One may find it ironic to hold “play to win” in the same breath as “compassion.” I do not find it difficult at all. Until we can become compassionate with ourselves and with our teammates and/or sojourners, we will have a hard time winning. The instinct to come together, to join forces against an opponent is enhanced by engaging in “P-U-L-S-E” as a team. In fact, it can foster a mental toughness that gives an individual or team an edge on the opponent and ability to “ACT,” as Rogers suggests. But win what? Winning in Point Guard Spirituality is the ability to grow through competition, which fosters feelings of flow. Winning is entering into the space of flow where everything is connected cosmologically and organically in a space of ecstasy and attunement. Point Guard Spirituality defines competition as the challenges we face in order to strengthen our skills and grow into more connected human beings, Source, earth, and creatures. It is a place where the goal is to win at progressing on the path of living a wholistic life that incorporates compassion, competition, and awareness. I believe it is the challenges we face—the competitions—that foster within us a will not only to survive but to thrive in space and time. It is through this competition we have the unique opportunity to engage in flow. Once we enter the flow, we win.

For athletes, the goal is always to win. The ultimate goal is to be in the best shape, with the sharpest skill in order to show up and perform their best every game. Athletes endure grueling strength and conditioning training to get them in the best shape possible. They have hours of practice to get them accustomed to the techniques, fundamentals, and theory of the game. It is also the place of exercising praxis. As the skill progresses through challenge and

competition of play, technique, footwork, and all things related to the “fundaMentals”⁴⁷² of the game, so too does the athlete’s ability to enter into the space of flow. Such progression is seen when the athlete is able to move from lesser skill to higher skill through challenges that foster the growth of their ability.

Athletes become better as they compete with those who have superior skills. It is like the old adage, “You only become the best by playing against the best.” Practice can be, and often is, enjoyable. As Point Guard Spirituality embraces the joy in life, we understand that practice may be difficult at times and yet it is through those difficulties that we are able to expand our skills and opportunity for growth. Such is the ripened ground for flow. Winning is achieved in Point Guard Spirituality when we enter the space of flow. When we are in the flow, we have feelings of ecstasy, awe, connection, groundedness, rootedness, completely in tune with the Source, self, earth, and creatures. This is a total awareness that speaks to the ability to engage practices that may be difficult at first and sticking to them—to practice. In Point Guard Spirituality we see the drive toward winning (entering flow) and maximizing our challenges in order to grow as both human and spiritual beings. This is different from a softer focus on compassion and contemplative practices as Point Guard Spirituality embraces the joys of competition and understands the importance and value of practice. The value of using competition and winning in spiritual formation is not unlike the way of asceticism. Asceticism in Point Guard Spirituality is a way of embracing challenges and using them as a means to foster growth and get us toward the ultimate goal—winning.

Aims

Insofar as transformation is a process toward wholeness, practice/praxis is essential.

⁴⁷² Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow in Sports*, 16.

Understanding perfect as “having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics”⁴⁷³ to make something as good as can possibly be, I contend, it is not ‘practice that makes perfect,’ but *perfect* practice that makes perfect, as Becky always said. Only through perfect practice is the ability to transform possible. Practice is repetition; praxis is the application. Therefore, the aim Point Guard Spirituality is to cultivate space that invites persons into the practice and praxis of contemplative practice through sports and play. It also aims to:

- Nurture spiritual formation through engagement of sports as study, as spiritual practice, as contemplative practice.
- Engage and value the spiritual formation of sports and play and its impact on our lives, communities, and nation.
- Develop skills of self-reflection, theological reflection, spiritual awareness, and sacredness.
- Foster critical thinking to recognize the story behind the story.
- Engender a skill set to understand paradoxes and to inspire capabilities to live between passion and possibility.
- Identify and deconstruct power and privilege based on race or ethnicity, gender, class, sexual, and gender identification.

Point Guard Spirituality invites critical examination of our lives and our world through sports narratives. It is a lens from which we can peer to investigate ways in which the construction of our narratives takes shape in the public square.

QWEST

So, what does Point Guard Spirituality look like in the public square? Again, my contribution is the construction of QWEST—a Queer/Queering—Womanist—Experiential—Sports—Transformation. QWEST assumes that narratives are saturated with assumptions about gender, race, power, violence, God, the “good”, the “bad”, the “other”—assumptions that are subliminally absorbed when the stories themselves are assimilated. Therefore, Point Guard Spirituality uses a critical consciousness to engage assumptions within one’s own narrative, as a

⁴⁷³ In *Lexico* (Oxford), accessed August 31, 2019.

participant or spectator, or in the narratives of sports figures. Thus, it uses critical questions to consider the spiritual and social function of narratives, with the understanding that knowledge, rooted in experience, shapes what we value.

Similar to Rogers' PULSE as way to engage compassion, QWEST is the way we engage Point Guard Spirituality. It is about using our experiences, spirituality, play/sports, and queerness to foster transformation. It is compassionate when it needs to be and irreverent when it has to be. QWEST is the *how* of Point Guard Spirituality.

Q—Queer/Queering: Aims to problematize systems, may or may not identify as queer, by “multiplying diversity, disrupting the status quo, and crossing firmly policed borders.”⁴⁷⁴

W—Womanist Spirituality: Everything is Spirit. We are all connected through divine energy and spark. Listens for and is moved by the Sacred, holding to the way spirituality is present in all things.

E—Experience: Embraces experience as the valid and primary source of knowing and wisdom gleaned.

S—Sport/Play: Embodied spirituality that can inform life and faith.

T—Transformation: Has the potential to reenergize individual and communal life and wisdom through keen mutuality and shared spiritual imagination.⁴⁷⁵

Queer/Queering: Attending to concrete lived experience, we work at the intersection of culture, community, and sexuality to engage in critical conversation.⁴⁷⁶ We ask questions that account for people who struggle to find authentic meaningful like on the boundaries of society and culture⁴⁷⁷ through problematizing oppressive systems and structures. Sex and sexuality re-enter the realm of the holy and pure—categories and distinctions that cease to exist as their boundaries are smudged and blurred both by a God and a people of faith who embody and

⁴⁷⁴ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

⁴⁷⁵ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, xvi.

⁴⁷⁶ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

⁴⁷⁷ Hoeft, “Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism,” 419.

embrace sexuality and sexual experience. A womanist spirituality embodies queer and queerness as it lives unapologetically into the idea of “a woman ...lov[ing] other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.”⁴⁷⁸

In a dualistic church influenced by and participating in heterosexist culture where the burden is on queer people to “come out” to society as “other,” it is no surprise that the church deems this “other” to be deviant. Point Guard Spirituality blurs the lines between sexuality and theology. It acknowledges, accepts, and embraces without resistance, denial, or demonization of the sexual. It does not have an either/or understanding of spirituality and sexuality. Instead it believes that the two are intertwined and informed by one another. While mainline Protestant churches have sought to marginalize queer bodies, Point Guard Spirituality combats such marginalization. Through acknowledgement that spirituality can be formed outside of the conventional church while still having intense connection to the Sacred, Point Guard Spirituality is an invitation home.

Womanist Spirituality: A womanist spiritual framework bespeaks wholeness, survival, empowerment, transformation of self, society, and culture with black women at the center, yet the transformation is for all without the hindering of any other group. Womanist spirituality critiques race, class, gender, and power relationships and values the human body and the life experiences of black women as valid and fruitful ground for engaging spirituality. Womanist spirituality also holds a view of sexuality as freedom. Womanist spirituality offers a (re)reading of Sacred Texts, which include the Bible but are not limited to the Bible. Sacred texts for womanists can include nature, current context(s), life experiences, ancestors’ lives, and

⁴⁷⁸ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, xi.

experiences in the world. It also considers ways in which African spirituality inform(s)(ed) the life of the slaves, a spirituality that has also been passed down in Christianity.

The aforementioned womanist tenets have at their core an incarnational theological stance. That is to say that the “Word became flesh” and the embodiment of Jesus Christ legitimize the body and the ways in which we are embodied beings going about the work of Jesus. They legitimize full humanness and transformation that leads toward the full flourishing for all for the common good. To this end, a womanist scholar/practitioner can use a practical and useful lens to engage the challenges and opportunities of sports as ground and a source to debunk, unmask, critique, and analyze power, race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. It can be said then that a goal of such endeavor would be to use sports and sports figures for the work of transformation of self, society, and culture. Point Guard Spirituality seeks to embrace all forms of spiritual and religious expressions.

Experience: As our stories are formed and informed by the social contexts in which we live, we understand that our stories are shaped by our relationship with self, creation, and the Sacred. Experience consists of the ways in which we use art, music, poems, prayers, and much more to tell our stories. Point Guard Spirituality holds deep respect for the various ways in which our stories are told and expressed to the wider community. It sees the human being as text, woven together through the possibilities that invite them to respond to life, the Sacred, and community. In this way, Point Guard Spirituality is concerned with the day-to-day lives of communities and individuals.⁴⁷⁹ It does this by deconstructing, (re)constructing, and transforming the way individuals and communities live, move, and have being in light of the interplay of Divine-human interaction, and the dynamic possibilities inherent therein. It is

⁴⁷⁹ Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” 1739.

through personal story—the lived experience—that theological reflection and social critique are engaged.

Sport/Play: Sports and play are pillars of human activity mediated through transformational experiences that always express themselves.⁴⁸⁰ They have the ability to foster and enrich faith, deepen connection to community and relationship with the self and Sacred.⁴⁸¹ Sports and play embody Spirituality and can develop and inform life and faith.⁴⁸² Sports and play embody Spirituality as they are a transformative force, a force that is for some a state of mind rather than activity. They embrace mutual engagement with one another that heightens experience with the Sacred. Sports and play pull us into the depths of human experience while incorporating the creative.⁴⁸³ Sports and play are activities or practices that occur in the gaps between freedom and structure.⁴⁸⁴ The ability to play with others fosters trust, a sense of belonging, and teamwork. This allows for the possibility of a new reality through the acceptance of difference.⁴⁸⁵ Point Guard Spirituality utilizes the ways in which play and sports engage spiritual formation through the ability to connect with self, community, and the Sacred.

Transformation: Transformation is the culmination of QWEST. QWEST leads to transformation that occurs through the involvement in sports/play and enter into the spirituality of wisdom.⁴⁸⁶ This wisdom for self and community is a lifelong process that is intentional and

⁴⁸⁰ Hamman, “Playing,” 42.

⁴⁸¹ Hamman, “Playing,” 42.

⁴⁸² Hamman, “Playing,” 43.

⁴⁸³ Koppel, *Open-Hearted Ministry*, 14.

⁴⁸⁴ Evans, *Playing*, 11.

⁴⁸⁵ Hamman, “Playing,” 46.

⁴⁸⁶ Streety Wimberly and Parker, “In Search of Wisdom,” 13.

received through remembering our process(es) and acting in love and humility. Transformation is the result of our experiences and the ways in which we have been formed spiritually. Point Guard Spirituality is experienced through performance as it extracts meaning of experience. Those experiences inform how we interact with our neighbors, self, and the Sacred. When we use self-reflexivity, we glean the wisdom of our past to inform our future while remaining present in the process. Point Guard Spirituality understands we are always in process of becoming and it understands the importance of pilgrimage. Whether pilgrimage occurs in foreign lands or sojourns throughout the course of one's life, this spirituality is about recognizing the journeys we have been on and using them to inform our relationships. Point Guard Spirituality understands transformation as occurring when womanist spirituality, experience, and sport/play have been utilized to discover God's surprising and transformative possibilities.

Post-Game V

This dissertation has explored the following questions: Is sports a valid location for spiritual formation? How can sports, for participants and spectators, be considered spiritual formation? What needs to be expanded in our definitions of religion or spirituality to consider the relationship of formation between sports and spirituality? What theological presuppositions must be challenged and/or expanded to consider the relationality of spiritual formation and sports? What is the capacity of each to inform the another?

Through my use of an autoethnographic approach, I traced my personal theological and active formation through sports following the concept of pilgrimage. Through my story, I engaged social critique and challenged academic and societal norms. While mainline Protestant churches and others have sought to marginalize queer bodies, like my own, I propose Point Guard Spirituality using a QWEST framework to combat such marginalization. A framework

that: uses a womanist spirituality that speaks of wholeness, survival, empowerment, and transformation of self, society, and culture. Through centering black women's experience, QWEST understands the human being as text; begins the hermeneutical circle with experience; and weaves possibilities that invite a response to life, the Sacred, and community. Thus QWEST invites those who participate in or spectate sports into transformational flow.

We engage sport and play as conduits of experiencing these mystical/spiritual experiences with God or the Sacred that lead to transformation and how we are spiritually formed. Through the use of play, womanist spirituality, and queering and problematizing systems, transformation results. Point Guard Spirituality is a quest. It is a quest to queer. It is a quest to use womanist spirituality. It is a quest to use and engage experience. It is a quest to use and engage sports. It is a quest for transformation. It is a QWEST in and of itself.

Thus, this dissertation has shown that sports, for participant and spectators, are means of spiritual formation. Sports are or can be spiritual practice. To this end, the field of practical theology spiritual formation is benefited by reflection, praxis, and reflection toward sports. Using autoethnographic narrative work, my story in particular contributes to the conversation concerning sports as spiritual practice. Within womanism, practical theology, and spiritual formation, experience is rated as most valued. It is through our experiences that we glean deeper wisdoms. Through our experiences we find connections between parts of us that seem unreconciled. Here, in my story, I used my own experiences with sports and spirituality to highlight the importance of viewing spiritual formation in this way.

Within womanism my story contributes to the variety of Black women's experiences. I highlight sports as a place for spiritual formation, a subject as yet unwritten about in womanist scholarship. My first-hand experience as an athlete has prepared me to use womanist discourse,

in that I value narrative and the lived experience. As a queer, Black, woman, athlete, pastor, and coach, I brought my full embodiment to my work as I live out Point Guard Spirituality every day. Such a proposal is missing in womanist scholarship and my voice adds to the colorful *mélange* of womanist voices. It is through my lived experiences as an athlete that I can personally speak to the influence of spiritual practices, through sports, in my life.

Sports as spiritual practice and contemplative practices themselves have truly shaped how I engage theological discourse, humanity, earth, and creatures. In a practical sense my attunement to Source has also been developed on the court, in training sessions, and during big games. I have embraced the joy and amazement of winning and competition, as the main objective in Point Guard Spirituality is to enter into the realm of flow. It is there I see this work speaking to the guild of practical theology. In its very essence, sports are a practical and yet highly spiritual way to engage Source. As scholarship in the field is missing such a location as mine, it is important as a practical theologian to have my locations brought to light and included. Jaco Hamman engages sports and play in ways that are foundational to Point Guard Spirituality, and yet he does not speak from a Black woman's perspective, or through the lens of an athlete, or my other locations. These are all very specific contexts that provide great opportunities for the guild to broaden its understanding of what it means to engage God in sports. It is also an opportunity for sports to be taken seriously as it is a place where deep theological engagement happens. And so this speaks to the ways in which sports is spiritually formative.

Using my autoethnographic research, I underscored the many ways in which I was formed spiritually through my participation in sports. It is there I believe this kind of narrative research is beneficial to the discourse of spiritual formation as it draws upon first-hand wisdom and experience. Spiritual formation has a rich history of drawing upon the first-hand experiences

and narratives of contemplatives and early Christian mystics. My autoethnographic research directs us toward an understanding of the ways in which sports laid the foundation for me to connect to Source in ways I did not fully understand at the time. Through my research I was able to look back upon my experiences and truly see how I grew as a human being; how I was more connected to my teammates and coach; the ways in which I connected to nature; and the contemplative practices taught to us on the court and in the locker room. Without doing this retrospective on my life as an athlete, I would not have been able to see the many ways sports have shaped and influenced my theology, cosmology, and engagement with human beings. Throughout my research I did not find any scholars speaking about spiritual formation through the lens of sports, which I believe is a loss. As spiritual formation is the study of how and why our theologies are shaped, I believe sports must be part of the conversation. It was through sports that I had my most meaningful and impactful experiences with Source. Sports is more than a valid location for spiritual formation as it fosters a sense of growth and the connection to flow. Flow in sports is very similar to the ecstasy felt in spiritual practices. Thus sports more than belongs in the field of spiritual formation.

As an autoethnographic researcher I found many places in my story that drew attention to the meaning and continuity of sports in my life. I have traveled the world; met strangers from distant lands who became family; conversed with some of the brightest minds in the business; coached some of the best women I know; and had the distinct pleasure of watching my teammates and those I coached go on to do great and meaningful things. Sports has been the connective tissue in my life. It is more than meaningful to me; it is part and parcel of my identity. In researching voices in the field of sports it was clear there were no voices speaking from my particular locations using first-hand experience and wisdom. Sports has the unique opportunity to

engage theological sources as the connective tissue in the way they teach technique, values of the game, and life lessons. Spirituality has always been a part of sports, and yet as a theologian I failed to find more research on the connection between the two and how spirituality informs sports and vice versa. My story points to the ways in which spirituality enhanced my sports experience. The contemplative practices I learned in high school certainly helped me during free throw shooting. I also remember the deep breathing exercises our coach took us through as did our stretches before practice. Spirituality has rich grounds in sports and the field of sports should take more seriously the contribution of spirituality to the formation of athletes. Doing this kind of narrative work showcases the richness seen in my sports experience through the lens of spirituality.

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ⁱ The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces, among other statutes, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive Federal financial assistance. Title IX states that: No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.